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COMMONWEAL

SPRING BOOKS

AN INTERVIEW WITH LES MURRAY
Missy Daniel

JIM FOREST
on Joseph Brodsky

BOOKS:

PAUL BAUMANN
on Alice McDermott

ELIZABETH BEVERLY
on Reynolds Price

NICHOLAS R. CLIFFORD
on Owen Lattimore

RAND RICHARDS COOPER
on William Maxwell

ROBERT M. HAYES on
the homeless

EDWARD T. WHEELER
on David Lodge

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the Myth of the
Independent Voter

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CORRESPONDENCE

On reading 'Ulysses'

Williamstown, Mass.

To the Editors: I am appalled by the views Mark Patrick Hederman ascribes to me in his review [March 13] of my book, *Jocoserious Joyce: The Fate of Folly in "Ulysses."* Though it is gratifying to be praised for a "brilliant elaboration...cogently argued, scrupulously annotated, and written in a vigorously readable style," this is like receiving flowers from your mugger.

To say "that there is no meaningful purpose to [*Ulysses*] other than that of humiliating and ridiculing anyone searching for such a meaning" is a hideous position to attribute to anyone. Obviously I would not have taught Joyce's *Ulysses* for twenty years, nor devoted five full years to writing about it, if I regarded it as a mere joke or cruel hoax. No teacher with half a brain and any heart would put forward such a cynical proposition.

Mr. Hederman apparently sees me as a dangerous nihilist or Boa Deconstructor. He seems to have read every other sentence and only heeded the half with which he disagrees. The list of his misrepresentations is too long and tedious to enumerate. Hederman has every right to read *Ulysses* as "good for the soul." In addition to this justly celebrated aspect of the book, which many of us have long cherished, I stress a competing comic aspect. My book is entitled *Jocoserious Joyce* because I value and elaborate both its jocose and serious elements.

ROBERT H. BELL

The writer is professor of English at Williams College.

The reviewer replies:

My question really is: Can one have one's fake and cheat it? You cannot declare a piece of ground to be a quagmire or a quicksand and, at the same time, a place to build, just as you cannot recommend a sieve as a satisfactory skillet. Is this author saying that Buck Mulligan is the presiding spirit of *Ulysses*? Is he saying that "when *Ulysses* isn't fooling us, it is likely to be setting us up"? Is he, or is he not, saying that when "his characters and readers struggle to impose theories and interpretations upon his creation, [Joyce] is only paring his fingernails while we are busily, foolishly misreading signs and contriving meanings"? Does not this author ultimately see *Ulysses* "reveling in contrariety and insufficiency, sporting in a fun house, enjoying a 'high grade ha'"?

If he does, then I cannot see how he can also claim that the novel is "good for the soul" unless through the salutary humiliation it provides for impact-lusting sychophants; if he does not, then I, as conscientious and fair-minded reader of his book, say that this part of his oxymoronic equation fails to come across to me. The first element in the "jocoserious," as I already stated in my review, is exquisitely elaborated.

MARK PATRICK HEDERMAN

Dying of health care

Detroit, Mich.

To the Editors: Christopher Koller's article "The Myth of No Limits"[March 27] drew my attention because my wife, Diana M. Jachman, recently died of breast cancer at age fifty-five. I feel that she died several years prematurely, partly because of the deficiencies of the present health-care system. The system reduces treatment options and results in poor decisions, even for patients who can afford to pay.

My wife's treatment options were foreclosed almost a year before her death, because Autologous Bone Marrow Rescue [AUBMR] is not performed in Michigan for breast cancer and is not covered by the state's largest insurer, Blue Cross and Blue Shield. We were given these and other basic facts by her oncologist, but they were not enough to make a timely, truly informed decision. Had AUBMR been done in Michigan, even though not covered by insurance, we would have been quickly put in touch with specialists in the procedure and with their patients. Instead of opting for conventional chemotherapy, my wife would have considered AUBMR much earlier in her illness, when that treatment would have been more effective.

Only after the chemotherapy failed did we seriously consider paying for AUBMR ourselves, but by then it was far too late. The prior chemotherapy and metastases in her liver and lungs had made her ineligible for all but the most experimental, unproven treatment protocols.

Medical expenses of the magnitude required for AUBMR require a lot of justification, but the current system results in fatal delays or ineffective alternative treatments, even for people who can afford to pay. Change in our health care system is too late for Diana, but change must eventually come, for the benefit of all.

JOHN H. JACHMAN

Jesus in history

Washington, D.C.

To the Editors: Please accept my thanks for the fine review-essay by Luke Timothy Johnson on the recent historical-Jesus books by John Dominic Crossan and myself [April 24]. That *Commonweal*

(Continued on page 30)

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COMMONWEAL

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The half truth follies

In war truth is the first casualty. The adage applies to civil discord as well. And so it appears in the aftermath of the "not guilty" verdict and the riots in Los Angeles. The airwaves and newsprint have been filled with half truths. What may be natural, at a moment boiling over with recriminations and anger, is also a reason for worry: the damage from thoughtless commentators and careless interpreters may be more lasting than anything done by out-of-control police or rioters.

Go back, for example, to 1965. Pressed to provide an explanation for the Watts outbreak, the Johnson administration trotted out the draft of a document, soon dubbed the Moynihan Report after its author, then under-secretary of labor, now Senator Daniel Moynihan (D-N.Y.) The document was incomplete and filled with the sort of verbal flourishes that get pruned in final versions for public consumption, but it made some prescient observations. No matter, it was soon buried under a heap of no less excessive rhetoric that flourished in the feverish atmosphere of a long, hot summer. It was the exceptional social activist (Martin Luther King, Jr., was one) who didn't attack the document and its assessment: two key factors were shaping the recent destiny of black Americans, male unemployment and the growth of female-headed families. Because of the blistering attack, for more than two decades the latter topic, as well as its linkage with the former, was shunted aside by those—black and white—who knew better. The people who were supposedly to be protected from the observations of the report have ended up paying the price of truths that were ignored.

The verdict in the L.A. police beating case was a terrible mistake in judgment. Excepting the jury and the defendants, everyone, even President George Bush and Daryl Gates, the Los Angeles police chief, seems agreed on that. But was the trial a travesty of justice? No. Change of venue, the prosecution's decision not to call King as a witness, a defense that argued the policemen were acting in the line of duty—all were unexceptionable decisions in a process that presumes the innocence of the defendants. And, except for retrying Officer Laurence Powell on one undecided count, there is no going back. Does that mean that Rodney King's beating will never be righted? He has entered a civil suit, the U.S. Justice Department may bring civil rights charges against the policemen, and the policemen themselves, who have been suspended from their jobs without pay, must still answer departmental charges. Daryl Gates is leaving as police chief; his aggressive and provocative style of policing will almost certainly disappear under Willie Williams, his successor; and the Los Angeles police chief's near dictatorial powers are under critical scrutiny.

The verdict angered many people, above all Los Angeles blacks who were outraged by the decision itself as well as fearful that it would be seen as a license for further police brutality. Blacks from all walks of life and all parts of the country were reminded of incidents of unwarranted police scrutiny or intimidation in their own lives. Clarence

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Page of the *Chicago Tribune* voiced the fear of many black parents: right now everyone thinks his three-year-old son is darling, but, Page asked, will they remember that when he's a strapping young man like Rodney King? But the matter of anger does not end there; it was not just blacks who were angered. Senator Bill Bradley (D-N.J.) delivered a scathing speech in Congress. One juror in the trial—a Hispanic woman convinced that the police were guilty—recalled how she had prayed and fasted in an effort to win the other jurors to her view. Many whites, who may not feel the visceral anger of blacks, nonetheless were heartsick at a verdict that showed how far we yet have to go in healing the wounds of racism.

But what exactly was the connection between that and the rioting, looting, and arson that left over fifty people dead and thousands of homes and businesses destroyed. Many who say they do not condone the carnage—who could?—say they understand it as an expression of the outrage blacks felt on hearing the verdict. But a black Los Angeles high schooler in a television interview a few days later showed no such confusion. Yes, he said, in the first couple of hours it was anger at the verdict, but after that people joined in looting and burning because everyone else was doing it. Or what of the two black women weeping over their burnt-out homes, asking where they were going to take their children? How is the beating and killing of innocent people understandable? How is singling out Korean-Americans for retribution understandable? If the riots were primarily an expression of black rage against racism, how is that so many Hispanics, and some Anglos, took part in the looting?

Half-truths abound. How do we sort the true from the false? Heroic behavior by some blacks saved a white truck driver; fearful withdrawal by the police may have encouraged the first rioters. At the moment, the dynamic of events seems a chaotic mix of hard-headed calculations and haphazard events and encounters, crimes of opportunity side by side with impassioned acts of protest, as much the result of class differences as of racial animosities, as much generated by greed as by anger. It does not help those who most need compassion, material aid, and the support of a national reaffirmation of the common good to be inaccurate in our assessments of responsibility, of what needs to be done, and of how we can effectively do it.

The nation has been reminded, once again, of how many Americans still live outside the protection of our laws and the comforts of our economy. That these events fall in the midst of a presidential election is an opportunity to pay attention to decades of urban neglect, to a shrinking wage base, and a decline in blue-collar jobs; to listen to those who don't normally make it on the talk shows or in news columns (and wouldn't it be useful to hear more from the student who stayed home, "because my mother wouldn't let me out the door," and less from gang members who are part of the endemic violence in Los Angeles); to consider both the commitments the country needs to make and the responsibilities that individuals in South Central Los Angeles need to shoulder. None of this should be squandered by liberal guilt or conservative righteousness, by blaming the victim or exonerating the criminal, or, above all, by canonizing the wrong half of half-truths.

AN EDITOR'S NOTEBOOK

BREEDING A KILLER

THE HIGH COST OF NEGLECT

There is an epidemic in the making. Its first victims have already died. It is caused by a well-known killer, once tamed but now, like Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*, once more virulent in a new and menacing guise. It could have been controlled by common-sense precautions, and for years it was. While the rich and the healthy are not likely to be its victims, it can strike anyone. It went on a rampage in a New York state prison last year, killing a guard and twenty prisoners. It is loose again largely because of official dereliction. It is tuberculosis.

The reemergence of TB as a major public health concern in the United States should not be a surprise. Like our crumbling infrastructure and the rage in our inner cities, its reentry was evident years ago to those willing to look. Its spread was fostered in part by official neglect, by the increase of poverty and homelessness, and by the outbreak of HIV and AIDS. According to Dr. Anthony S. Fauci of the National Institutes of Health, unless there is a serious effort to contain it, the spread of new forms of drug-resistant TB could become a public-health threat as serious as AIDS.

Worldwide, TB causes more deaths than any other infectious disease. In the United States, however, thanks to the use of several highly effective drugs, TB had been brought largely under control over the last twenty years. These medications—chiefly isoniazid, rifampin, and pyrazinamide—are not expensive: under $300 for the course of treatment. But the treatment can be long, from nine months to two years; and the effect of abandoning treatment before it has been completed can be catastrophic. Not only can the disease return to the carrier, but it may do so with a vengeance: made impervious by previous types of treatment, drug-resistant TB can ravage the patient and become highly contagious. According to a report in *Newsweek* (March 16), it can be 50 to 80 percent fatal. In 1990, TB in the U.S. rose 16 percent (25,701 cases) over '84, and in New York state it reached its highest level in twenty years. But more alarming: since the early 1980s, drug-resistant TB has increased from 3 to 7 percent of all cases. In the last three years it has been detected in seventeen states. An opportunistic, airborne infection, drug-resistant TB could become the norm.

Why this outbreak? Because proven methods of treatment were not maintained (monitored compliance gradually diminished as public-health staffs were cut back and defunded); because of overcrowding in prisons and shelters; because of the spread of HIV; and because health-care programs in poorer neighborhoods were gradually weakened. A recent study of one New York City hospital found that only 11 percent of those on TB

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treatment were completing the full regimen (in contrast, Tanzania, one of the world's poorest countries, has a completion rate of 85 percent).

What then needs to be done? This is a *public*-health crisis and therefore demands a concerted, *public* response. That means both personal and governmental. Personal: individuals should be taught the effectiveness of covering their own sneezes and coughs (one sneeze can launch 1 million infectious droplets, only one of which is needed to infect a weakened victim); and of suspecting TB in themselves or others if such signs as persistent coughing, abnormal weight loss, and fever are observed. And governmental: broad-scale public education and screening; rapid diagnostic services; new attention to completing therapy (including more supervisory personnel, rewards that reinforce compliance, and efficient legal controls when called for); isolation of infectious patients, particularly in prisons, shelters, and hospitals, and improved means of purifying air in such settings; ongoing screening of health-care workers exposed in the line of duty, as well as HIV patients; and a massive effort to: (1) develop new and quicker diagnostic tests, and (2) find new, effective medications for drug-resistant TB.

The failure of the federal as well as other strata of government to contain this new outbreak may now be compounded by an unconscionable refusal to deal with the epidemic fully and forcefully. Three years ago, a Department of Health and Human Services report called for $30 million a year to eliminate TB. The Bush administration never asked for the money. In two subsequent budget requests, it sought a total of only $19 million. For 1993, it has finally asked for a substantive increase ($66 million); but because of the swift spread of the disease in the interim, experts are now calling for $90-$125 million annually. Clearly, for every dollar well-spent now, many more will be saved in the future.

When it comes to TB, the best defense is clearly a good offense. We must all take precautions; but we must attack the disease: in our legislatures, our laboratories, and in our health-care goals and practices.

PATRICK JORDAN

WHO'S THAT KNOCKING AT MY DOOR?

THE PERKINS LADY/MAN!

THE PERSUASIVENESS OF GUILT

At least five days a week most of these old houses are alone in the care of their alarm systems, but it was not always that way. In earlier times, when salespersons walked from door to door carrying heavy cases, offering housewives something to buy, someone was at home to hear the doorbell. Willing to open the door; open as well to the possibility that life could be enhanced by the purchase of a bottle of vanilla, a box of herbal bubble bath, or a tin of floor polish. The relationship between seller and prospect was personal, an eye-to-eye confrontation, often fraught with guilt for the one who refused to buy.

In our lives, first there was the Perkins Lady, who seemed to come with the house. Hardly had the moving van exited the alley than she was knocking at the front door. In her flowered hat and white gloves, you could have mistaken her for a Barbara Pym character on her way to a tea at the rector's garden. In truth, she was an intrepid and formidable adversary.

"I am your neighbor, Miss Fleming," she beamed. "I have a gift for you." As soon as the vegetable scrubber was in my hands, I was in hers. This innocent exchange sealed and defined our relationship. Thereafter I was unable to say "no" to her gloved hand on the brass knocker. Inevitably I had to buy something. Until she retired a few years later, her seasonal visitations led to pantry shelf additions needed or not. Cinnamon sticks, double-strength imitation vanilla, peppercorns, miraculous dusting compounds said to act with magnetic power on dog hairs.

One hot August day many years ago, I did refuse to see her, but not directly. One of the children ran in from the hopscotch grid she and a friend were drawing in pink chalk in front of the house. "She's coming down the block," she announced. "Miss Fleming, on our side of the street."

I would not ask one of the young Catholic legalists who lived here in those times to lie on my behalf. Nor could I on this steamy day, already heavy with household disasters, face Miss Fleming's cheerful news of the world as she knew it: whose children in the next block had chicken pox or who had remodeled her kitchen or who had just bought six boxes of these adorable potpourri sachets for Christmas presents. (As though I didn't already know: one of those purposeful women I envied but could not emulate, never snuck-up-on by somebody's birthday, always ready with appropriate gift, card, and ribbons.)

I ran upstairs, kicked off my gym shoes, pulled a sheet over my head in someone's unmade bed. Just in time I was able to shout to an unwilling accomplice, "Tell her your mother's taking a nap!"

I was relieved when Miss Fleming turned in her heavy cardboard case and moved to Florida, but without pause in the service, the Perkins Man appeared. Enthusiastic, jaunty, and well beyond retirement age the first time I saw him. A golden "P" on his lapel says that he's been doing this for fifty years. Can I deny this man a chair on which to set his sample case? Can I refuse to buy one more half-pound of Hungarian paprika? The frilly holders for miniature muffins I will never make? The aromatic room-freshener—even though the local opinion has been voiced: "It smells worse than the left-over broccoli"?

Only once did I consider refusing him access. "My husband is very ill," I explained. "I'm on my way to the hospital. I simply can't think about buying anything right now."

"My wife died last week," he said softly, handing me a tiny bag of moth crystals. "Just enough to preserve a favorite sweater," he explained as he flipped through the colored pages of his catalogue. "Here's something the children will love to use on their toast," he assured me. And I found myself soon afterward in

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possession of a jar shaped like a teddy bear, filled with sugar and cinnamon, although the last child had grown up and moved away at least five years earlier.

KATHARINE BYRNE

Katharine Byrne, who appears frequently in these pages, lives in an old Chicago neighborhood.

REPORT FROM AMSTERDAM

WRITES POEMS, WILL TRAVEL

JOSEPH BRODSKY

Joseph Brodsky was introduced to an audience at the John Adams Institute in Amsterdam last December not as *a* poet but as *the* poet. "In him," said his friend and translator Kees Verheul, "we are faced with *the* poet, or rather the carrier of the poet." Listening impassively to the introduction, Brodsky fiddled with an unlighted cigarette, occasionally placing it in his lips, until after about ten minutes—ending a drawn-out silent drama that upstaged his introducer—Brodsky finally lit it, inhaling deeply, then blowing out the smoke in a long thin stream. His toying with the cigarette resembled an erotic play.

His first task was the unveiling of a bronze bust of himself, the work of the sculptor Sylvia Willink. "The only respect in which this head differs from the one I carry on my shoulders," Brodsky commented after admiring the Caesar-like image, "is that it can't speak—and it can't kiss." Brodsky's English is fast, fluent, almost reckless. He may have been born and raised in Leningrad/St. Petersburg, but his voice is at home in the New World.

He started off the reading with "A Song," a poem with the refrain, "I wish you were here, dear," which concludes, "What's the point of forgetting/if it's followed by dying?" (It was, he confessed, a pastiche of Auden's "Twelve Songs.") Then came "Epitaph to a Centaur" with the line "...his animal part turned out to be less durable than his humanity." Then "The Butterflies," about a life one-day long, a space in time just right for the blaze of a poem.

Especially when reading in his native language, Brodsky recites like a deacon singing the Gospel in a Russian church, a kind of liturgical chant, the recitation of each line governed by strict rules of rhythm with definite places for rising and falling stresses, that are impartial to the content of the words. This way of reading creates a sense of no longer being in ordinary time or space. He reminds me of watching Vladimir Horowitz performing in a concert hall in Moscow, playing with total detachment as if, far from playing, he was listening, and perhaps not even listening to this particular piano. Similarly, Brodsky's face, even while he chants the poetry with such concentrated purpose, seems a face in the audience rather than belonging to the poet. His eyes wander toward the large windows and the view they offer of the sky and street and other buildings, like a child in school waiting for recess.

In the pause, I told him about how his way of reading reminded me of the chanting of the Gospel, or the way a cantor sings the prayers in the synagogue. "Of course they are deeply related," he said. I made a similar comment in the public discussion that followed. The deacon, the cantor, and the poet are all practicing the "melic art," Brodsky responded, pausing like a good teacher to spell *melic*. [OED: "*Melic*: Of poetry; Intended to be sung; applied *spec.* to the strophic species of Greek lyric verse. Hence applied to poets who compose such verse."] "It is quite deliberate. Meters are meters. There is music in poetry. I try to bring out the euphonic aspect of the poem. My manner of delivery goes back to the training I received in my Russian high school. A good teacher requires a lot of memorization of poetry and requires you to deliver. Your recitation makes it clear to the teacher what you have understood."

In this century, Brodsky continued, the poet in the West has the problem "of almost always being on the defensive, aware of the sardonic listener who will smirk at the poet's raptures." Thus he tends to read diffidently, taking some distance from his poem. And this is a great pity because in fact "poetry is an act of mental aggression upon the audience. The self-effacing poet should perhaps take the next logical step and shut up altogether."

A question was asked about nihilism. According to Aristotle, Brodsky replied, there are four different temperaments and each has to do with the location of bile in the body. "I have no philosophy, only temperament." (Later he quoted a Japanese poet: "I've got no principles, no conviction—just nerve.") His own temperament leads him to shrug off the problem of death, as if to say, "You know you are going to lose. So what?" Someone with another temperament may be quite irritated and preoccupied with the problem and even develop a philosophy of nihilism. But for himself, he went on, "nothingness is a lousy subject. How can one make a philosophy out of it?" "In Russian we have the word *nichtoe*—nothing. It's an interesting word with too many consonants. It doesn't give you a sense of limit. It suggests a journey." (Later, commenting on the euphony that exists in every language, he noted that "Russian words are two, three syllables, minimum. To utter a Russian word is an acoustic event.")

He noted that experience of extraordinary events does not necessarily produce a poem. "Extremes of experience have a tendency to bring out banal expressions. You can survive Hiroshima or twenty-five years in a concentration camp and not write a single line, or experience a one-night stand and write an immortal lyric."

The question was asked whether poetry could have anything to do with politics. Brodsky said no, the reason being that the task of the poet is to avoid clichés, to create precedents, to make something new. ("Art," he said, "is older than any form of social organization.") "The artist is trying not to repeat his predecessors, to say the least." Thus it is sometimes said of a poet that he is ahead of his time. This is an incorrect perception, he explained. "A poet is never ahead or behind his time, just operating on his own frequency."

He said he hears people complain that they don't care for

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modern poetry. The reason, he said, is that poetry builds on itself: it has a kind of development through time. You could understand modern poetry if you began with the poetry you *do* understand and work from there. Reading modern poetry "is like boarding a runaway train. You may decide you don't like the train. Its route, well, it's not yours, that's all."

Someone commented on how striking the contrast was between the original poems that Brodsky had recited, and the reading by the translator of the same poems in Dutch. Brodsky said this was the result not so much to differences in the verbal content of the poem in its two forms but "how you read," and that this is greatly shaped by one's national background. "Russian stresses the music. Otherwise you are just counting syllables."

He was unhappy about the "big infusion of English words" into modern Russian. But language has its own life, refusing to behave according to the tastes of a balding poet, even when he has the Nobel Prize. Wasn't it hard for the writer to have to live in exile, he was asked, and isn't it a pity so many writers are exiles? Brodsky found it not so remarkable. "You have guest workers and boat people, not only exiled writers. This takes the orchid out of the writer's lapel. To live elsewhere is a norm in the twentieth century. There's nothing very significant about it. It's just more palatable when it's a writer than with those possessing other skills." There was something to be said for the writer packing his bags. "The further away from his homeland the writer is, the better for literature." One's address isn't so important.

"A poet," he concluded, "is like a bird. He chirps no matter what twig he lands on—and mistakes the rustle of leaves for applause."

JIM FOREST

Jim Forest is the author of, most recently, Living with Wisdom *(Orbis). He lives in Alkmaar, Holland.*

OF SEVERAL MINDS John Garvey

FREEDOM TO OBEY

CHOICE AS A MEASURE OF THE FALL

Saint Paul stresses the "glorious liberty of the children of God," and the freedom of the Christian is a central theme in much Christian writing, early and late. It is easy to see how this would seem to dovetail into some strains of recent political theology—with liberation theology, for example—or how it would seem to be echoed in the stress, in democratic society, on freedom. Freedom in America (and probably in most other countries) has been equated with the right to do what you choose, unconstrained by any external coercion. We think of ourselves as most free when we are able to choose between alternatives; and freedom is guaranteed politically when barriers to choice are removed. This has been a major part of the argument in favor of an unrestricted access to abortion, of course, but this is only the most prominent example. There are others—they range from the right to choose suicide to the obviously less controversial right to choose the person you will, or will not, marry. In any case, freedom and choice are seen as indivisible.

The idea of obedience is placed almost in opposition to freedom. The two aren't often compared, but somehow obedience and freedom feel opposed: if you must be obedient, how can you be free at the same time? Obedience is a bothersome concept for us, because it brings to mind hierarchy, something that also makes us uncomfortable. The implication is that someone or something above us has a proper claim on us, one which may get in the way of an unrestricted freedom to choose between alternatives.

The idea of freedom as it has developed in our kind of democracy is very different from whatever Christian freedom might mean. We believe that Jesus is Lord, that he is divine, the revelation of the Father. We also believe that he is the image of true human freedom, the sign of what we are meant to be; and if this is true it is necessary for us to see that obedience has much to do with whatever Christian freedom means. The choice between alternatives is not a major part of the picture in the great hymn in Philippians 2:5-11—at least it is not the *defining* part.

The idea of freedom in obedience is open to great abuse. Institutions can insist that they mediate God's will, and claim that giving them obedience is equivalent to obedience to the will of God. Obedience in a common monastic sense of the word can liberate you from the need to make unimportant decisions and can free you for other things; it can also work as an evil medium of control in totalitarian structures, some of which are religious. Still, the fact is that freedom in the Christian sense is essentially related to obedience—but this does not mean an obedience to law, or to institutional structures. (Obedience may involve these things—they may help us to be obedient to God—but they are *not* to be equated with that obedience, and are not finally the point.)

What is Christian freedom like, and how is it not like freedom as our culture tends to define it?

Saint Maximus the Confessor, involved in a seventh-century controversy over how Jesus Christ could be said to have a human will, referred to the deliberative will—the will that feels compelled to make choices—as a product of sin, the result of a fallen humanity. It may be hard for us to understand how the element in us which seems most free—the ability to make choices between alternatives—could be seen as a maimed and crippled thing, not will in its clearest, most liberated state. That understanding is essential in a time when the word "freedom" (like the word "love") has become sentimental and corrupt.

Some of those Christians who helped Jews hide from the Nazis during World

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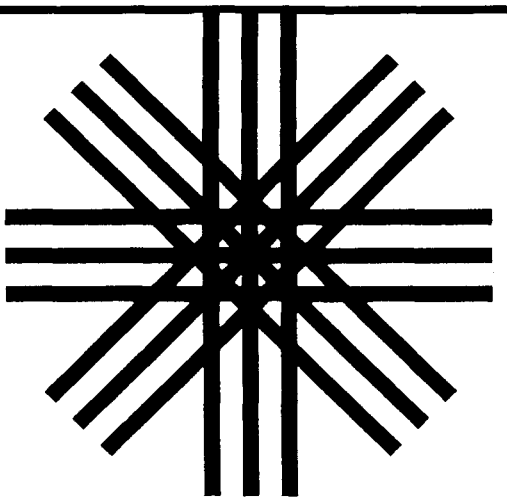
War II said that, confronted with the situation, they felt that they had no choice. Were they less free than someone who, similarly confronted, might feel an ability to weigh alternatives and then decide to help (or not to)? In Matthew 25, those who are told that they are inheritors of the kingdom because they fed and clothed and visited the Son of Man when he was in need are baffled: "When did we do this?" They are told that they did it whenever they acted compassionately toward "the least of these my brethren." It is important that they did not know; if they had not been impelled to compassionate action but had decided to do it, perhaps because they would be doing it for the Lord, they would (to quote another part of Scripture) already have received their reward.

Is a decision to feed the hungry more free than an unreflected-upon action to feed the hungry? Does the experience of choice here reveal true freedom, or insensitivity and relative hard-heartedness? Don't get me wrong: making a decision to feed the hungry is better than not feeding them, but it is not necessarily an illustration of us at our best, or our most free; it is an illustration of our fallenness that in this situation we can feel a choice, a hesitance, and this is what Maximus meant: there are times when this deliberative, fallen willing is as good as we can manage—but it is not what we are meant for.

Another decision: once married, I am not free to choose among women other than my wife. Am I less free as a result? Or does the commitment meant by marriage offer a new freedom, which choice can't comprehend? My love for my children is in some profound sense helpless: I can't decide whether or not to love them, and I would not be more free if I experienced this as a choice. But in my experience these relationships have been liberating in a way I could not have imagined before entering them.

A final example is the way in which a painter or poet is led to certain words and word combinations, or colors and shapes. There may be some hesitation and deliberation involved in the process of arrival, but they come from moving toward what is experienced as the one right place, the word or color that needs to be there. A state of real clarity would eliminate hesitation in love, or in language (which may be why Jesus, uniquely among people quoted in Scripture, *began* his sentences with "Amen, amen"—meaning, "This is the way it is").

The New Testament Greek word for sin means "missing the mark," the implication being that there is a standard against which we are measured and from which we have fallen. Obedience is simply a matter of conforming ourselves to that original, whatever it takes. According to Philippians, it means a self-emptying that has little to do with choice, but rather with vocation: what are we meant to be? *Being* that is the only freedom that matters, in Christian terms. The model we are offered was "obedient unto death." Reduced to institutional terms, this can be blasphemy. However, the alternative definition offered by democratic political structures, the identification of freedom with choice, isn't very helpful. We do have the freedom to reject what we are called to be—that is part of our liberty: God will not coerce us. But the result of taking that choice would not be freedom. □



THE GRAYMOOR PRIZE

The Friars of the Atonement announce the third annual Graymoor Prize, to be awarded to the best essay on any aspect of ecumenical or interreligious affairs. The prize is intended to encourage and support new ecumenical and interreligious ideas and perspectives. The award-winning submission, which may take the form of a scholarly or critical essay or a personal narrative, should appeal to the interests of the general educated reader.

Original and unpublished essays of approximately 2,500-4,000 words should be submitted to the editors of COMMONWEAL who will make the final decision following consultation with a panel of experts. The winning essay will receive a prize of $1,000 and will be published in COMMONWEAL. The editors reserve the right not to award the prize.

Deadline: October 1, 1992. Announcement of Prize: December 18, 1992. The prize-winning essay will be published in COMMONWEAL's January 15, 1993, issue. This essay will become the property of the Graymoor Ecumenical Institute. All other essays will be returned to their authors after January 1.

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POETRY IS PRESENCE

AN INTERVIEW WITH LES MURRAY

MISSY DANIEL

Les Murray is, simply, Australia's greatest living poet. He lives with his father, his wife and three of their five children, on forty acres in a valley in the bush north of Sydney, up the coast of New South Wales. Although he has been a major literary figure for several decades in England and Australia, only now is his work becoming readily available and familiar in North America. A few months ago the London *Observer* pronounced him Australia's "demotic" poet, an apt description for a poet frequently compared to Walt Whitman.

This year Farrar, Straus, and Giroux is publishing Murray's collected poems under the title *The Rabbiter's Bounty* ($25, 322 pp.), as well as *The Boys Who Stole the Funeral* ($20, 71 pp.), a long poem described as a novel sequence. His other verse collections include *The Vernacular Republic* and *The Daylight Moon*. Murray has also published two collections of articles and essays, *Persistence in Folly* and *Blocks and Tackles*, and has edited both *The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse* and *An Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry*. He is a "good mate" of such distinguished poets as Seamus Heaney, Joseph Brodsky, and Derek Walcott. Brodsky calls him "the village explainer," and Walcott has written of his work, "There is no poetry in the English language now so rooted in its sacredness, so broad-leafed in its pleasures, and yet so intimate and so conversational."

Murray, fifty-four, became a Catholic when he went to university in Australia, and Catholicism, he has said, is "the spirit in which the poems are bathed." His verse revels in Australian idioms and landscape, and evokes an aboriginal sense of place. "I am only interested in everything," he said in Boston, where this interview took place. Yet he has also said, "I am interested in one thing only, and that is grace." What his guileless, intense, impetuous, and visionary poetry makes clear is that both are true. M.D.

MISSY DANIEL: What is it that makes a poem a religious poem?

LES MURRAY: The simplest thing to do, I suppose, would be to show you one which talks about it. You might have come across "Poetry and Religion." It's a poem that's open to God, rather than closed to God. And if God chooses to take part in it, so much the better. I think that's ultimately it. You open your poem to the possibilities. What a poem is at its best is a quiet little removal of death from ordinary circumstances. It's been placed one small, decisive step beyond the mortal. It's something that's been made immortal but is quite ordinary at the same time. It's taken that little momentous step over the line, and it's as if you could put your hand through the glass of death and touch it.

DANIEL: "A poem is an afterlife on earth," as you've written?

MURRAY: Yes, yes. There's something that's delivered out of death. Any work of art, while any of it is still visible, has that quality about it.

I was writing once about the poetry of Sappho—we've got very little of it, you know, just fragments. But those fragments still have that quality. Or a smashed statue, if you've only got a head and a bit of torso, it's still got that quality of deathlessness, of beyond-deathness. It seems to be provoked by an integration. You integrate in any work of art the life of the conscious mind, the dreaming mind, and the body. They're in a kind of fusion. You can always detect when that's happened and it has that kind of immortalizing effect.

DANIEL: Immortality and poetry, or immortality and the written word, came to mind reading your epithalamion, "Towards the Imminent Days." I was struck by the line about how "it is the earth that holds our mark the longest."

MURRAY: That's a mortal mark, yes. It's an archaeological fact: If you dig ground up, thousands of years later archaeologists can still tell what you did. Even aircraft flying over a piece of farmland will spot where the foreigners were, hundreds and hun-

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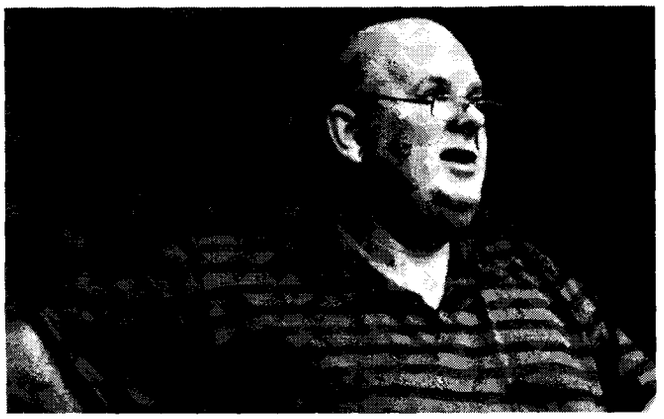

dreds of years later.

DANIEL: For one's mark to be immortal, can it be a word, a written word?

MURRAY: To be a long-lasting mark, it can be a word. That was just a kind of mortal longlastingness in the earth that I was talking about. (I'll tell you a sad thing, though. That poem lasted a lot longer than the marriage that it was about. They split up about five or seven years later. I said, "Next time I'll write an elegy. See if they can get out of that.")

DANIEL: Has there been any poet other than you since Gerard Manley Hopkins who dedicates his books to the glory of God?

MURRAY: I don't know. I don't know when I started doing it. It was a fair time ago. I just thought to myself one day, well, it's time to do that. It would be distinctly ungrateful not to.

Hopkins was the chap who turned me on to poetry. Like all the boys of the 1950s, I was brought up military. We had this military fantasy in our heads. We were going to be the soldiers of the Third World War. We were far too tough to look at poetry. And that's still true, according to the kids.

And then I was turned round. I was just finishing high school and two teachers who believed in teaching outside the curriculum showed me a few things that I had not seen before. They alerted me to Hopkins, and also to the existence of Australian poetry (which was not then taught anywhere except Leningrad and Toulouse). One, the English master, had the feeling that I would like Hopkins, and bang, I suddenly discovered this language with a live electric current through it—you know, powerful stuff. I'd been casting around for an art form for a year or so. I'd gradually been moving away from military fantasies. I tried painting and I knew I'd never be any good at that, because basically I didn't like it. I didn't like getting paint on me. I just didn't have any technique. I started trying to write a novel, and it was rubbish. I really wasn't interested that much in character and plot.

I discovered that poetry was about presence. I couldn't have explained it to you when I read it, but that was the thought. I later found out how to express it—that poetry was about essence, about making things real and present to yourself and the other readers. [It was] about patterns, too. Being a bit of a solitary, I wanted to know what the rules of reality were. I used to drive my fellow students crazy in high school working out the rules. They all seemed to know the rules, and I didn't.

DANIEL: You turned to Catholicism when you went to university. Did you have some sort of epiphany, some conversion experience?

MURRAY: With me the action mostly comes before the words. I later learn how to express it.

One day, when I was eighteen, I was talking to a friend. I'd just met him. It was the first week at university, and I said, "What religion are you?" I didn't care. It was just an idle question. He said, "Catholic. That doesn't make any difference to you, does it?" I'd never heard of persecution of Catholics, or dislike of Catholics. I'd heard a little bit of it when I was a kid, you know. In our Free Presbyterian church they had these old theories about wicked priests and nuns, and old scandals of that sort. I didn't take much notice of it. Catholicism was quite unreal to me. It was the religion of a few of my cousins, and that was all. But I was struck by this slightly defensive reaction. I began to look into it, and I thought, "Oh, I belong to that." I recognized immediately that I belonged to it.

DANIEL: What did you identify with?

MURRAY: I identified with the Eucharist. I thought, yes, yes, the absolute transformation of ordinary elements into the divine. I know about that. It didn't strike me as unlikely, and it opened such illimitable prospects of life. Most secular mythologies seem to be anxious to close the possibilities of life down and delimit them. This one opened out.

DANIEL: There's a lot of humor in your poetry, for example, your poem on St. Vincent de Paul, and you have said one of Catholicism's attractions over Free Church Presbyterianism was humor. Catholic friends could make affectionate fun of sacred matters, and that helped lead you back to Christianity; also, you note, Catholicism gives your poems their spirit, lightness, and generosity.

MURRAY: There wasn't a lot of humor in Free Presbyterianism. I was fascinated by people who could joke about the sacred things of their religion—who could sing "Dominoes and Biscuits." I'd never struck anything like that. There was no joy whatever in the strange white light of Protestantism that I'd seen. Mind you, the strange white light of Protestantism I'd seen was a very pure one. It was pure seventeenth-century Calvinism. Although it had this great barrenness and rigor, it also produced a few saintly people. Our minister was a really lovely, saintly person, which is as clear a proof of the grace of God overcoming man's dogmas as I ever saw.

I didn't leave those people with any kind of dislike. It was just that [Free Presbyterianism] had a bad habit of turning people into spiritual bullies: they went in for competitive holiness. I've struck that a lot more times since, but that was the last time I saw it religiously. I saw it next in secular terms—you know, political correctness. First time I struck political correctness it was called Calvinism, and I think that's the mother of all of it. It's ultimately a puritan kind of impulse.

DANIEL: What are your observations of American Catholicism?

MURRAY: I know nothing of it. The Mass seems to be much the same translation. People pour scorn on the English trans-

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lations. I quite like them. I understand how people can miss Latin terribly. I was actually formally baptized at the age of twenty-four—sort of shilly-shallied around a long time before I finally joined up, because I was afraid I'd make my father feel miserable. I thought, I'm not likely to die in a hurry, so I'll put it off.

DANIEL: Like Augustine?

MURRAY: Right. Except he went in for sin. I was too shy for sin. I just dodged it for Dad's sake. I finally joined up, and Dad has never mentioned it. He just preferred to leave that one alone.

DANIEL: I'm told also that your father does not read.

MURRAY: He actually forgot how to read. He finished school when he was fourteen, which was the legal age. Next day he was plowing with horses. He was a timber worker, a bullock driver—a chap who drives oxen in the bush, a terribly hard worker. Their only recreations were dancing and going to cricket. When he got married at twenty-eight he picked up the newspaper, I think it was on his honeymoon, and said he couldn't read it. It took him about a week to get the trick of it back. He doesn't read, but he can.

DANIEL: Does he read your poetry?

MURRAY: He reads a bit of it. Occasionally, a comment from him will indicate that he's read something and has thought about it.

DANIEL: You've written a little poem called "Distinguo":

> Prose is Protestant-agnostic,
> story, discussion, significance,
> but poetry is Catholic: poetry is presence.

MURRAY: I wasn't meaning anything sectarian by that. I was just thinking historically. It seemed to me that Protestantism was declarative and Catholicism was a matter of presence, that it was closer to poetry.

DANIEL: The Australian novelist Janette Turner Hospital has said your work evokes for her the Hebrew Bible and the psalmists. Do you feel that identification yourself?

MURRAY: I will say that for the old Free Presbyterian church: It induced me to read the whole Bible, and I enjoyed it no end. I think I'm the only person in the history of that church who ever got a mark of 1200 out of 1200 for scriptural knowledge. One time I used to know a lot of the Bible by heart, so when they gave us our quiz on the matter, I just recited.

I've got a theory myself that Protestantism, or the original impulse toward Calvinism, at least, came back with the crusaders and is in fact a derivative from Islam. It has many of the same features—the great love of bareness and spareness and abstraction. That business of learning the Bible by heart very much parallels Islam's learning the Koran by heart.

DANIEL: In D. H. Lawrence's novel *Kangaroo*, set in Australia, he wrote that "the vast continent is really void of speech."

MURRAY: Lawrence talked a lot of absolute horse manure about that sort of thing. He was a wonderful writer and a rotten researcher. He got a novel delivered into his lap by sheer blind good luck, and didn't bother to look at the local literature at all, or any of the art, and reckoned it wasn't there. The continent also scared the daylights out of him. He was an Englishman, you know. You can sort of sympathize with him, but only as the reaction of a European looking at Australia. It's nothing to do with the reality of Australia or the way that we see it.

DANIEL: You have such a command of words, but you also have a deep appreciation for wordlessness. "Nothing's true that figures in words only," you wrote in "Poetry and Religion," and "Things are so wordless," in "Noonday Axeman."

MURRAY: I think the two go together. If you know a bit about words, you know how much can't be said. A poem has got to be danced in, and dreamed, at the same time as it's spoken. And it might not even be a poem. It may figure as a painting or a sculpture or a building. The process of fusion of those three things in ourselves—the body, the dreaming mind, and the conscious mind—is as likely to produce an invention, or motorcar, or a philosophy, or a fine quilt, or a marriage, as it is to produce

Les Murray

Poetry and Religion

Religions are poems. They concert
our daylight and dreaming mind, our
emotions, instinct, breath and native gesture

into the only whole thinking: poetry.
Nothing's said till it's dreamed out in words
and nothing's true that figures in words only.

A poem, compared with an arrayed religion,
may be like a soldier's one short marriage night
to die and live by. But that is a small religion.

Full religion is the large poem in loving repetition;
like any poem, it must be inexhaustible and complete
with turns where we ask Now why did the poet do that?

You can't pray a lie, said Huckleberry Finn;
you can't poe one either. It is the same mirror:
mobile, glancing, we call it poetry,

fixed centrally, we call it a religion,
and God is the poetry caught in any religion,
caught, not imprisoned. Caught as in a mirror

that he attracted, being in the world as poetry
is in the poem, a law against its closure.
There'll always be religion around while there is poetry

or a lack of it. Both are given, and intermittent,
as the action of those birds—crested pigeon, rosella parrot—
who fly with wings shut, then beating, and again shut.

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art. Poetry is just one of the many poems that might be produced by that experience.

Humans seem to need that fusion—what I call whole-speak, as distinct from narrow-speak, which is just head talk, just reason. I don't think humans are a rational species; I think they're a poetic species. Humans need that experience, and they'll have it in some form or another. A few of us put it into words and make actual, literal poetry out of it. But most people put it into, say, their hobby, their marriage, their ideology, their whatnot.

DANIEL: You are a rarity in a way, an Australian who stayed home.

MURRAY: You know, it does us terrible harm that more didn't stay home. If we had the best of our people back home where they belong, where we need them, it would do a great deal to improve the intellectual and artistic life of the place. When people go away, mediocrity takes over. We've got a horrible world of critics and academics in Australia, mostly political—the diehard left-wingers who behave like Free Presbyterians: terribly censorious, bullying, political criticism and jealousy. The sad thing is that their own ideology is its own punishment. Our literary/intellectual world is pretty well poisoned, from top to bottom.

DANIEL: Then why haven't you left?

MURRAY: I belong there. Damned if I'm going to have them run me out. I also thought it was time somebody stayed, so others would stay. I didn't want to go. I wouldn't feel at home in any other country, and it was time that the vast majority of Australians, who are not the intellectual elite, had their poet right there who wrote to them. Most of the poets have in fact stayed in Australia, and have got on with their writing.

Our real problem was distribution, getting our work out. It's only in my generation we've been able to get our work out to England and America and places. That's not really a demand for world fame, or anything. That's just a demand for normal distribution.

DANIEL: Isaiah Berlin, in his book about Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, made use of the ancient quotation: "The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing." Are you a hedgehog or a fox?

MURRAY: Probably both. You know, [it's] according to where the sun is when I get up. There's a whole lot of big things I suspect to be so, and a whole lot of small things that I've noticed to be so.

I had a rattler of a big idea the other day, and I can't see a hole in it yet. And that is, where can evolution or, indeed, progress be heading, but toward God? Which might be why people are suddenly getting scared of the idea of evolution and of progress.

DANIEL: I think many people would say progress and modernity have taken us away from God.

MURRAY: Not if it's progress. Not if it's evolution. There's been a bit of a subterranean rumbling in the Green Movement. They are absolutely dependent on evolution as an argument against Christianity. But it leads to God. So you're stuck on a train that will go toward your enemy's station. □

Les Murray

Incorrigible Grace

Saint Vincent de Paul, old friend,
my sometime tailor,
I daresay by now you are feeding
the rich in Heaven.

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STAGE

MOST HAPPY GUY

LOESSER IS ALWAYS MORE

When Eric Bentley put together his idiosyncratic American-drama volume for his Anchor series, *The Modern Theatre*, he included the book of *Guys and Dolls* as one of the plays that "show the American theatre at its liveliest," that "move with the swing of the American life-rhythm." It does all that, certainly, but it is difficult to tell quite how when one looks at the text on the page, even though the book that Jo Swerling and Abe Burrows carved out of the Damon Runyon mother lode has vitality of its own and the marvelously inventive lyrics of Frank Loesser are there for the reader. You have to have Loesser's music to get the real sense of the show. It was 1965 when Bentley's collection was published, six years after the musical opened on Broadway; he suggested that *Guys and Dolls* might be the best American musical comedy. There are still people who think so, although other contenders have come along in the last thirty-five years. What is obvious, however, is that Frank Loesser is firmly fixed in the pantheon of Broadway composers, and he has the revivals to prove it. Up the block from the Martin Beck, where *Guys and Dolls* is playing, *The Most Happy Fella* is running at the Booth; there was also a production of it earlier this season at the New York City Opera. There was even an attempt in recent memory to resurrect *Greenwillow* off-Broadway. Now if producers would come up with a *Where's Charley?* and a *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*, assuming that there are youthful Ray Bolgers and Robert Morses waiting to take center stage, we would have a Loesser full house or—putting *Greenwillow* aside—an unbeatable four-of-a-kind.

Guys and Dolls, as the subtitle says, is "A Musical Fable of Broadway." Fables are traditionally teaching tales, and if one looks closely enough at this fable—which I would not advise—it seems to be saying, as the title song does, that "love is the thing that has licked 'em," meaning all those guys, now

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settled into domesticity, who "used to be something of a rover." For the final curtain, Sky Masterson has slipped on a Mission uniform and picked up the bass drum (shades of Cusins in *Major Barbara*) and Nathan Detroit has apparently let "the oldest established permanent floating crap game in New York" sink. I would not take any man-taming messages too seriously. Miss Adelaide does marry the elusive Nathan and Sarah Brown gets the very willing Sky, but this is just fairy-tale happy-ending stuff.

One does not go to *Guys and Dolls* for its plot, although it is fun to watch it unravel, or for any implications that might spin off it. The triumph of the show is its score. There are no bad songs in *Guys and Dolls*. I may squirm slightly at some of the lines Sky has to sing in "I'll Know," but there are no musical dead spots. Even the Spanish number—a requisite of 1950s' musicals—is amusing. The sentimental songs are effective and affecting, and the comedy numbers—particularly the admirable "Fugue for Tinhorns"—are not only delightful in their own right but give the show the gritty texture that makes it so appealing. Broadway gamblers and hoods and shady ladies may never have been like this in the real world, but the real world is better for having them in Loesser's gloss on Runyon.

By now everyone—at least, everyone who saw photographs of the lines forming outside the Martin Beck—knows that the revival is a hit. So it should be. It is awash in cartoon color—Tony Walton's sets and William Ivey Long's costumes—the singing-dancing chorus is continually and happily on edge. Nathan Lane's Nathan Detroit and Faith Prince's Adelaide are flamboyantly comic and Peter Gallagher's Sky is impressive, more charm than smarm. Josie de Guzman is the weakest of the principals, but that is partly because Sarah Brown is so muted a character among this band of grand caricatures. Jerry Zaks, the director, has stuck close to the original production, although there are some new tricks—the constant juxtaposition of tiny, round Ernie Sabella's Harry the Horse and Herschel Sparber's giant Big Jule. Occasional doubts surfaced in my general pleasure in the show, particularly when Faith Prince seemed to be working in too calculated a way—a sudden drop in register or in volume—to underline her comic effects. I wondered if Nathan Lane's very soft "so nu" in "Sue Me," deemphasizing the rhyme, was an unnecessary assertion that he is not Sam Levene, and if Prince's flat, throwaway delivery of "I could honestly die" in the same song was a distancing from the way Vivian Blain carried the line noisily into tears. It is probably only old folks like me who go comparative at revivals (I decline to tell you my reactions to *A Streetcar Named Desire*). Most of the enthusiastic audience will simply respond to the here-and-now of the new production—and rightly so.

The Most Happy Fella, down from the Goodspeed Opera House, is also a first-rate revival. Based on *They Knew What They Wanted*, it sticks close to Sidney Howard's central plot, pares away some garrulous characters, and adds some comic ones to what is essentially a romantic drama. *Fella* has never seemed as much a consistent piece as *Guys and Dolls* does. Even though it is more insistently musical (much of the dialogue is sung), the comic numbers like "Big D" and "Standin' on the Corner," however amusing, come as intrusions, breaking the dramatic thrust of the play; and the comedy courtship of Cleo and Herman, even when it is played charmingly, as it is here, gets too cute for me. The strength of the show is the dramatic ploy and the songs that carry it—character songs for the most part. Spiro Malas is particularly good as Tony, not simply because he has a fine voice, but because he can get the shyness, the effervescence, the vulnerability of the character; he even gets away with the impossible song tour he has to sing to his dead mama. The production at New York City Opera was distressingly wooden, particularly when one compares it with the fluidity Gerald Gutierrez's direction and Liza Gennaro's choreography bring to the Broadway version. I am one of the guys who prefer Loesser in his Broadway low-life vein, but if you are a fella with a taste for somewhat more exalted Loesser, *The Most Happy Fella* at the Booth is for you.

GERALD WEALES

MEDIA

CATHEDRAL TO OCTOPLEX

REMEMBERING THE MOVIES

Two interesting and related things happened—my stars, for a change, must have been in synch—as March gave way to April and spring began (in California you can tell the seasonal change by the appearance of Easter candy in the grocery).

The first was that I received a copy of the fifth edition of *A Short History of the Movies* (Macmillan, $38, 667 pp.), by Gerald Mast and revised by Bruce F. Kawin: more about that in a while. The second was that I watched the Turner Network's six-hour history of M.G.M., "When the Lion Roars." These two events taught me something I should have, but hadn't, realized about movies: I mean "the movies," as an American institution and secular religion: i.e., that in their way they're as dead as the Elizabethan stage or as Jacob Marley.

"When the Lion Roars," hosted by Patrick Stewart, directed and written by Frank Martin and Michael Henry Wilson, and featuring a smorgasbord of clips from old M.G.M. films and a salad bar of interviews with old M.G. M. hands, is as satisfying a long Sunday afternoon as you could want—unless, of course, you live near Kaplan's Delicatessen in Los Angeles. Flashy as all hell, with sets and costumes that not only summon up the great M.G.M. monster productions, but catch, in their own way, the M.G.M. sublimity of glitz—who *said* the Tacky can't be Great Art?—it's simultaneously a hymn to the rise and fall of the undisputed Rolls-Royce of the Hollywood studios, and a surprisingly honest and gritty history of the hype and human cost of an extraordinary moment. The moment, which lasted from, say, 1918 to 1980, was when the most advanced industrial nation in the world channeled Homeric effort, ingenuity, and

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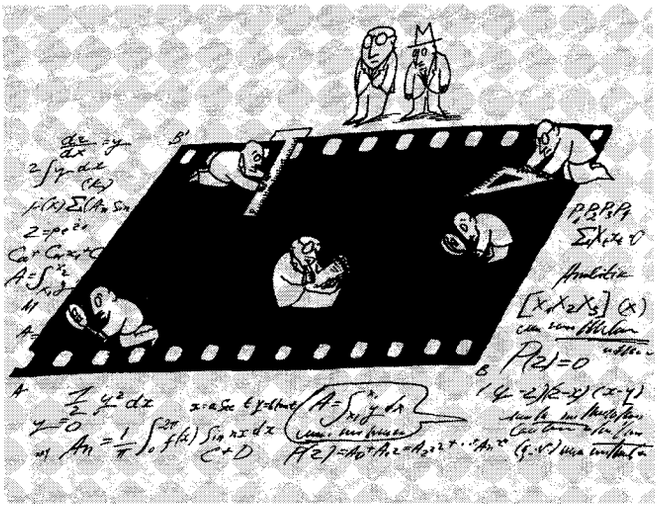

wealth into a technology whose sole and sacred purpose was entertainment-for-a-price; and in doing so created a mythology as complex, rich, and infinitely variable as anything the Babylonians or the Middle Ages ever managed.

The series itself, of course, is also—in the spirit of its subject—partly self-serving hype. Ted Turner owns, as of 1990, 2,200 M.G.M. films, and he's not only showing them on his channel, he's marketing them in video: gotta keep Jane Fonda in Spandex, I guess. But that's okay. It even enhances, makes more plangent, what is for me, finally, the all-but-inexpressible *sadness* of "When the Lion Roars."

Because the moment is over. We don't go to "the movies" anymore: not to that cool dark place where we all came together in silence to see what was "on" this week. We go to the shopping-mall octoplex to catch *Lethal Weapon VIII* or *Dances With Wolves II: The Revenge* and have our eyes and ears blistered by a nonstop assault whose main point—sorry—is to conceal from us the fact that we really don't enjoy, anymore, sitting with strangers in a theater watching the screen. If it's that good, we'll rent it on video.

Because it's in our homes that we really watch movies these days, isn't it? The Loews and Rialtos, those great cathedrals of the American religion in the fifties and sixties, have been replaced by the Quaker meeting-houses of the den or the living room and VHS. Just as theater was subsumed and transcended by the movies, the movies have been subsumed and transcended by the Tube: and at each stage, our viewing—our communion—has become less communal and more privatized, more likely to separate us one from the other even as it claims to bring us together. I remember a whole audience horking together with laughter at the first showing, in South Bend, Indiana, of *The Pink Panther*. And last night I sat in my den and listened to the canned laughter on the sound track of "Married...With Children." This is, I think, what the physicists call "entropy."

Look at the state of film teaching in American universities. Sure, it's not quite as egregious as the teaching of literature these days, but then again, it hasn't had as much time to go rancid. Kids today are taught—the real word is "bullied"—to think and write about movies in terms of a jumble of half-digested semiotic, Marxist, and feminist theory that has as little to do with *real* semiotics, Marxism, or feminism as it does with the films it pretends to discuss; but a hell of a lot to do with the academic narcissism of its practitioners. It's a sure sign an art has lost its vitality when the ghouls move in and start trying to dissect the corpse. I open, almost at random, a recent book on film theory and read this: "To the extent that Elliot identifies with E.T. as foundling, he is excused from appropriating the phallus at his father's expense."

One needs a beer.

Or one needs *A Short History of the Movies*, by Gerald Mast as revised by Bruce F. Kawin.

Now it's bad academic form to review a book by a friend. But I think I just told you that I think most of the academy is terminally silly. So yeah: Bruce Kawin is one of my oldest friends and maybe my best, but that doesn't stop him being part of one grand book.

Gerald Mast, that good and generous man, first published his *Short History* in 1971, and it almost immediately became *the* textbook for any beginning class in film. In its scope, wit, and breathtaking range of association, it was the ideal introduction to the one truly international art form of our century. Mast died early, in 1988, and his family and Macmillan Press asked Kawin to revise and update the next—the fifth—edition of the book. Now this, it turns out, is like asking Stephen Hawking to help you with your geometry homework.

Because Kawin is mad (I *told* you he was my friend): as mad as Gerry Mast was about the grandeur and glory of film as film, but also the sort of madman who cannot tolerate seeing a date off by as much as a year, a title—English or Rumanian, makes no difference—misspelled by as much as a letter or an accent mark, or a major or minor director's work discussed without full and intimate knowledge of *all* his/her films. The kind of madman who makes the encyclopedias the rest of us depend upon for our expertise. So what we have here, after two years of painstaking agony, research, and rewriting—and I've got the phone bills to prove it—is a great book on film turned into an indispensable great book on film. All of Mast's original genius and lovely, loving consideration is still there, and now with what has to be the most absolutely reliable filmographic data to be found in any book on film, with Kawin's lovely and loving prose to boot, discussing recent directors Mast either didn't consider or only considered glancingly. Plus more.

Look: I'm not trying to sell you the book. If you care about film, you'll get it eventually anyway. What I'm saying is that, just as "the movies" seem to be disappearing as a really *living* part of our culture, and just as the deconstructionist freemasons of the inarticulate appear to be carving that heritage up for their own smelly little ends, there appears this wonderful thing—a work of *real* scholarship—that, like all real scholarship, keeps alive the wonder and holiness of its subject, even for those who won't ever know the magic of the lights going down in the Loews and the curtain parting before the screen. All I'm saying is that for the TV generation, in Mast/Kawin as in the Turner series, somewhere the lion still roars.

FRANK McCONNELL

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Imperishable identities

AT WEDDINGS AND WAKES
Alice McDermott
Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, $19, 213 pp.

Paul Baumann

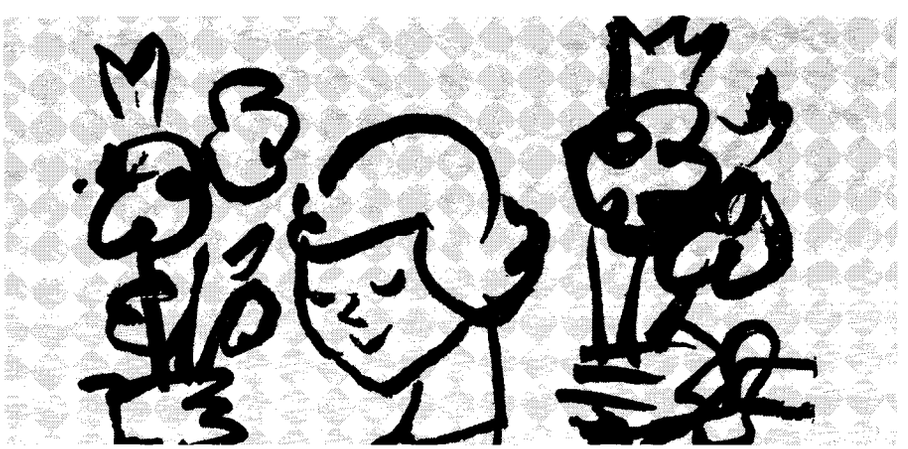
Old Momma Towne, the widowed Irish matriarch of Alice McDermott's stunning new novel, orchestrates the ceremonial gatherings of her four stepdaughters with a certain "papal dignity," the narrator tells us. She's a very Irish pope, to be sure. Of her daughter May's future husband's irritating habit of sending flowers, Momma Towne is as suspicious—and as unforgiving—as the proverbial Irish peasant. "Don't think I didn't notice," she announces in her brogue. "First of the month it's roses, last of the month daisies....A man who runs out of money at the end of the month is no manager." Of the soon-to-be-married couple's unwary plans for the future—a future where inevitably every joy must be paid for in the hard currency of loss—Momma Towne is equally dismissive. "All of us moving out to Long Island with the grass and the trees. A regular vision of heaven," she says with her bitter wit. "It wouldn't hurt him to show a little more caution."

Weaned on Momma Towne's ruminative resentments, her stepdaughters—especially Lucy, mother of the three children whose wide eyes and sharp ears bring us into this enchanted world—can nurse a grievance with the same fierce devotion that their men milk a bottle of whiskey. Unsatisfactory marriage, alcoholism, disfigurement, and early death all haunt this stolid, intense, striving middle-class family. "My husband died right outside this apartment door," Momma Towne is fond of recalling, like a priest pronouncing the words of consecration. Her sister, her husband's first wife, died in childbirth in the same apartment. Her son John, handsome and fatally charming, has been exiled for his incorrigible drinking, relegated to an annual Christmas visit. So when Momma and her stepdaughters—Aunt May, Agnes, and Veronica still live at home—gather in her dark, cluttered Brooklyn apartment, there are many spirits to be appeased.

As a family the Towne women are a formidable and brooding presence. More than anything else, it is their "easy access to regret" that sets them apart and endows them with spiritual authority. That regret is also, irrevocably, a shared history and very much a corporate identity. Without it, they would be cut off both from what joy they can hope for as well as, paradoxically, from their deepest, most individual selves.

Bob Dailey, Lucy's husband, shrewdly evaluates the source of Momma's hurtful affections in telling the story of her prodigal son. "Not, their father was now saying into the darkness as he drove, because of all the torment John had put Momma through in his wild days, oh no. That was not what had so thoroughly hardened her heart. What had done it, what had made her mad as hell, he said, was that the bastard had stopped.'She feels the same way about God.'"

McDermott is an elegant stylist who can tell a story from a variety of points of view, and she can get away with such luxurious sentiments and sentences. *At Weddings and Wakes* is a complex narrative that beguiles with the strong rhythm of its prose and the almost liturgical movement of its story. The novel opens with a bravado set piece in which the three young Dailey children are led by their fitful mother on the magical journey from their suburban home to Momma's fourth-floor walk-up. It is a journey in time and history as well as geography. Momma Towne's apartment is the focus of family life and lore, a shrine where a sacred creed is faithfully recited. As with the opening scene in McDermott's previous novel, *That Night*, which propels the reader into the lives of an otherwise unexceptional teen-age couple, *At Weddings and Wakes* immediately sweeps the reader into the numinous world of the Townes. McDermott turns the homely artifacts of everyday life—in this case Chiclets, butterscotch Life Savers, Syrian bread, the *Reader's Digest* and old *Playbill* magazines—into talismans and portents. While an unearthly light and shadow suffuse the streets and rooms, the smells, sounds, and



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Joan Rohr Myers

Women's Studies

There is more at stake here
than witch bones burning.

In the shadow of epics
silence
bites the sweet songs
for old dead men
and spurns a single truth.
Muslin and milk
make a long-limbed climb
to move the margins of being
as an unnamed nudge
at Noah's side
whispers
"You'll need to touch
a second skin."

And there is madness
suggesting tidy answers
pinned in dissection,
as if two halves
were still a whole,
as if the space between
were not a fuse
sizzling
its long goodbye.

voices of a familiar American landscape establish the thick texture of these lives.

Set in the early 1960s, the routines of the kitchen, followed by the small formalities of the "cocktail cart" anchor daily life. We are also given a glimpse of the strained intimacies of more traditional family gatherings. McDermott kneads this domestic experience in a way that seeks to hold seeming opposites—sisterly love and jealousy, motherly pride and resentment, transience and timelessness—in tension. The Townes do not so much rise above circumstance and history as they hallow them. McDermott is intent on evoking the timelessness present in every passing moment; on reclaiming the past that, though seemingly invisible, colors every present emotion and thing.

In this shadowy world lineage carries weight—we inherit both strengths and weaknesses, and often our strength is also our weakness. As Reynolds Price has written, "Nobody under forty can believe how nearly everything's inherited." What the Townes inherit circumscribes their hopes, but is equally a gift—and can never be one without the other. It is unusual to read a contemporary novel so knowing in its acceptance of the boundedness of individual life and of life itself. "Love me, love my parents; love what I come from and what I will, with no more choice or volition, become," the narrator observed in *That Night*. *At Weddings and Wakes* seems an imaginative exploration of that sense of intergenerational identity, a turning away from the contemporary promise of self-determination toward the more lasting satisfactions of human connectedness and continuity. In so doing, the novel is eager to show how people are as much tied to one another by shared loss as by any transitory triumph or joy.

This is most poignantly realized in the penultimate chapter, where the wedding of May—a former nun who unexpectedly finds love in middle age—is refracted through the reader's increasingly focused knowledge of the bride's impending death.

There is nothing unique or particularly exhilarating about May's modest church wedding and reception. At the party, barely pubescent cousins sneak into the liquor, children scout out adult duplicities, the unwanted solicitousness of little-known relatives goes undeflected, mothers and fathers drink and dance with a youthful intimacy, and the dark corners of family history and the usual salacious gossip are given new life. All the familiar, sentimental songs are played and the traditional dances danced.

McDermott is meticulous with all the dowdy details of this unpretentious middle-class rite. At the same time, however, what is disconnected and incomplete about human love and life is miraculously made whole through the frame May's death imposes on the scene. Despite the brokenness and gentle absurdity of the individual lives involved, May's wedding/wake comes to transcend all temporal confusion. By allowing us to see May's ordinary happiness through the sharp focus of her death a mere four days away—a death as inexplicable as the love she had only recently found—McDermott returns us to the timelessness not of grand achievements, but of the humblest human desires, even failings.

This search for "what part of love remains" in the face of death and the erosion of time was a crucial theme in *That Night*. "Peace was annihilation and to say that love could fade, that loss could heal, was to admit forever that there would be no return of the dead," imagined one teenage protagonist. The dead are very much with us, thanks to the Towne women. Indeed, we are incomplete without them, or so thinks the otherwise gently skeptical Bob Dailey. "But there was something they [the Towne women] gave him, too, with all their ghosts, something he couldn't deny: they provided his ordinary day, his daily routine of office, home, cocktails, dinner, homework, baths, and twenty minutes of evening news with an undercurrent—it was like the low music that now played on the kitchen radio—that served as some constant acknowledgment of the lives of the dead. He was not so much unlike them, there were among the dead people he loved and missed and would not set his eyes on again, and the women's constant chorus of anger acknowledged that for him...."

At Weddings and Wakes reminded me of Joyce's great story "The Dead," with its haunting winter light and landscape, sharp social observation, and tribute to the bittersweet redemptions memory, desire, and longing afford. In "The Dead," the accident of hearing an old ballad calls a middle-aged woman back to the sharp passion of an adolescent love that ended in death. The dead never leave us, Joyce seems to be saying, for in our "last end" we all share a common fate and perhaps even an imperishable identity. "One by one they were all becoming shades....His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world: the solid world itself which these dead had one time reared and lived in was dissolving and dwindling."

Alice McDermott takes us to very much the same place—even amid the tacky sincerity of suburban Long Island!—where the seemingly solid things of this world crumble before the elusive powers of human remembering and longing. At weddings and wakes we are allowed to say "forever." □

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WHAT HE DID, WHY HE DID IT

BLUE CALHOUN
Reynolds Price
Atheneum, $23, 364 pp.

Elizabeth Beverly

Imagine this: You are a fifteen-year-old girl, holding in your hands an enormous document, 364 pages long, written to you by your sixty-five- year-old grandfather. During the past year your mother, his daughter, has died one kind of agonizing death. Your father has died another. You blame your grandfather for your father's death, and the document you hold is your grandfather's means of asking for your mercy. Within his long story, covering a span of pain for thirty years, lie stores of great tenderness, honesty, and remarkable beauty. His suffering has been tremendous. He tells you things.

He tells you that when he was thirty-five he fell in love with a girl only slightly older than you are now, despite the fact that his thirteen-year-old daughter, your own dead mother, was devastated by the betrayal she intuited. She and her mother already knew what it was like to lose him to drink. Your grandfather admits that he shouldn't tell you certain things, except that he wants your mercy; so he tells you anyway. These "facts" concern his body, its wild longing for Luna, the girl he loved. He is not coarse, nor is his account detailed, but there is a moment during the telling in which he slips and, although throughout the text he has always said "you" when he means you alone, his excitement compels him to write this: "You could tell (Luna) barely knew what next, but just when you were about to lead her—or pull back short of something you'd craved for thirty years—she'd flow right on to that perfect place, just before you, and make it pay you triple the gain you'd gambled on." No matter what pain or experience has prepared you to hear these words, what can such words do to a girl's heart?

Imagine this: You are sixty-five-year-old Bluford August Calhoun, and the day of reckoning is at hand. You believe that you have scorched all the decent women in your life, and you believe that you alone can explain to your granddaughter Lyn the reason that her own short life seems to lie in ruins around her. You can even assign a date to the beginning of this end: April 28, 1956, the day Luna strolled into your store behind her mother, in search of an auto-harp. If you are Blue Calhoun, you want to be loved, and everything will become a song-like story in your mouth, even this confession; you will find the words of longing and shame crooning out of you, evoking landscapes and heads of lettuce and even your own dead mother, Miss Ashlyn. When you speak of April 28, you will say, "...that one day fell down on me from a clear spring sky, no word of warning. It tore the ground from under my feet, and everything around me shook the way a mad dog shakes a howling child." Nice. Powerful. Not quite accurate. Because you'll know, even as you write these words, that the Day didn't do everything by itself. You were the one who unzipped your pants.

There are moments in this long flow of language where your own honesty startles even you: "...Every drunk I've ever known—me included...—has one secret he'll fight like a rabid pit bull to keep. *If the truth be told...we don't give a pickled goddamn on Earth for the harm we do. Any pain you feel in the wake of me is your tough luck. You likely deserve every tear you shed. Sit there and eat it....*Those 'you's' don't mean you at all, my darling; but they did apply, years back, to your mother." If you are Blue Calhoun, you must wonder, as you write this, why anyone should trust you.

Now imagine this: You are simply a caring reader, in search of a good book. You

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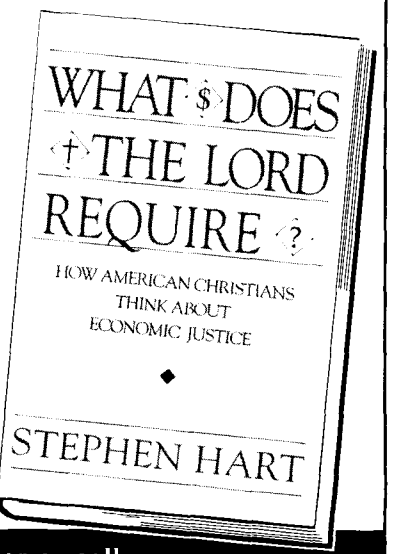
WHAT DOES THE LORD REQUIRE?
How American Christians Think About Economic Justice
STEPHEN HART



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understand that Reynolds Price has a new novel, and since Price tends to take the world seriously and finds that fiction can provide the ground for moral inquiry, you are eager to read *Blue Calhoun*. The frame is simple, a letter addressed to a grandchild; the novel itself promises to clear up the mysteries resident in the opening pages. Suspense is assured. Soon you find yourself in the presence of a storyteller who seems to have forgotten nothing over the course of thirty years, a man who, if he overwrites, may be forgiven on the grounds of passion. He seems to be a man who desires to take full responsibility for the misdeeds of his past. He's willing to bear with uncommon humility whatever sins and accusations he can heap upon himself. As you read you grow to like him. He is immensely likable. Occasionally he reminds you that he is not really speaking to you, but to his granddaughter. Then you recollect the narrative frame and recall that this novel is at once an explanation and a plea for mercy.

At moments it occurs to you, as it occurs to Blue, that perhaps it is inappropriate to heap such a confession on a child. Priests, therapists—*they* are trained to withstand the onslaught of truth. Why a child? You know that this is a novel about literal corruption, something breaking, about the lost innocence of children, about "good enough" men like Blue who cannot seem to remember that certain violations are violations even if, especially if, a child craves and awaits love.

Reading this novel confuses you, *because* you should be able to close a novel and place it on the shelf after you are satisfied that it expresses laudable intentions and acts of love. Everything about Blue's confession compels you to forgive him now. He has so bravely told the story of his failures, and in telling it, has faced them. A novel like this may be about redemption. It seems that even the publisher believes it is.

But imagine this: You decide to take Reynolds Price as seriously as he deserves. And then you know that what you have been reading is not a novel, but a letter intended for someone else. Blue is not asking for your forgiveness—he is asking for Lyn's—and the very extravagance of his effusive missive, regardless of the particular pain she has suffered, because of the particular pain she has suffered, is an onslaught on her soul. Reynolds Price has asked nothing less of you than to witness, in the most helpless fashion possible, a great and eruptive act that would violate a beloved child in the name of love. By the time you see the nature of the violation, the body of unasked-for knowledge pressing against a child's consciousness in the same way that an adult body can press open a child's waiting flesh, you too have grown to love Blue. You want the best for him, despite the voluptuous narcissism of an old sinner who believes in sin, a man who goes to AA to save his life but remains doggedly pure of the taint of late twentieth-century therapeutic rhetoric. You may understand that his wife Myra is co-dependent, but you want to believe along with Blue that she'll never be other than saintly.

If with Price's help, this novel becomes a letter which has accidentally fallen into your hands, you will recognize young Luna's plea and warning for what it is. Buried in the heart of the text, these are the words she speaks to Blue after waking from a deep sleep: " ...Everything I do is known to God. He's yet to claim I've gone astray, my conscience says I'm moving right, but don't you fail to go back home and read the verse where Jesus says, 'Don't harm a child or you'll be wishing some kind soul would hang a millstone round your neck and throw you out in the midnight sea.'"

How many children have been harmed, and continue to be harmed, by men who love as fiercely and protectively, as ineptly and selfishly as Blue? How many children are harmed because the body of their innocence cannot be left alone by those who claim to cherish them? Why do so many of us refuse to love our children, to know our children, the way God loves and would know us all? Blue is not an evil man; he's better than many of us will ever be. Braver. More hopeful. Full of faith. But perhaps to be "good enough" is not to be good at all. Or perhaps within the final paragraph resides the salvation that will allow Blue to find a way to be truly good at last.

Naturally this novel is flawed in the ways that such a letter must always be flawed, in the way that Blue's particular brand of self-indulgence requires. Characterizations are more or less successful. The plot could tighten in places, surge forward in others. The final section is particularly troubling in its failure to bring Lyn to life as a person, not a destination. But through its insistence to be every bit as anguishing and baffling and disheartening as a good life, *Blue Calhoun* becomes a great novel. It enraged me. It broke my heart. □

REMEMBER RED-BAITING?

OWEN LATTIMORE AND THE "LOSS" OF CHINA

Robert P. Newman

University of California Press, $30, 649 pp.

Nicholas R. Clifford

Newman's book brings back painful memories to anyone who has read about, or lived through, the era of Joseph McCarthy. It's unlikely that any of the readers of this journal ever believed that Owen Lattimore was responsible for the "loss" of China, or was the leading Communist agent in the United States—or indeed a Communist agent of any sort. What is new and valuable here is Newman's use of the Freedom of Information Act to gain access to the F.B.I. files on the Lattimore case (the C.I.A. was a good deal less forthcoming), so that he has managed to uncover a good deal of new and fascinating detail about the period (such as, for example, the poisonous rivalries between various government agencies concerned with prosecuting Lattimore). The courts, of course, eventually exonerated Lattimore of the various

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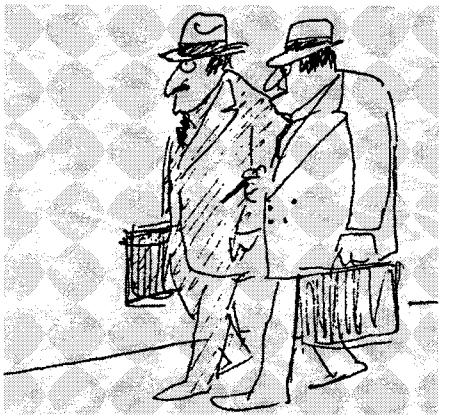
charges against him, but not before his career in this country was virtually ruined. Not surprisingly, after his ordeal, he decided to go abroad, finishing his career on the other side of the ocean at the University of Leeds.

Though the publisher's blurb calls the book a "magisterial biography," it deals primarily with the years between 1945 and 1955, when Lattimore found himself the target not only of Senator McCarthy, but of the China Lobby, the F.B.I., the Senate Internal Security Subcommittee, and the House Un-American Affairs Committee, to say nothing of various other individuals and groups who had appointed themselves guardians of this country against Communism. All this Newman tells well, in great detail, and it is useful to have the information pulled together in a single work. Other important facets of Lattimore's career are well drawn: his passion for Central Asia and his admiration for the Mongols, caught between Soviet and Chinese encroachment (the latter rather more serious); his wartime service in China and his early support, against the mounting evidence of inefficiency and corruption, for Chiang Kai-shek.

In other ways, the work is rather less satisfying. Newman writes as if the battles of the forties and fifties were still being fought, as if our perceptions of the world had changed little since those years. Yet surely with the collapse of Communism in the last several years, the time has come for some reflection on what the term "anti-Communist" means, and meant back in those days. One has the sense that it is still implicitly a dirty word in Newman's vocabulary—except when it is used to describe McCarthy's victims. Over and over he protests that Lattimore and those like him were "anti-Communist," and that's good, because it shows that they were freedom-loving democrats. But when people with whom Newman disagrees are "anti-Communist," there emerges rather an odor of disapproval, as if they were no more than paranoid red-baiters. Yet surely there were very good reasons to be anti-Communist in those days; after all, opposing Communism no more makes one a McCarthyite than being anti-Nazi makes one a Stalinist; and if some of McCarthy's victims, who had joined left-wing causes to oppose Hitler, thought of themselves as "premature anti-Fascists," perhaps some of Stalin's opponents were no more than premature anti-Communists.



"Believe me, democracy wouldn't be so popular if we called it Communism."

More seriously; perhaps because the author's main interest lies in the controversy surrounding Lattimore, he often sounds like a defense attorney. Take one small point, for example. Much was made

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during the various hearings of whether Lattimore knew that a certain Chi Ch'ao-ting was a Communist. Now, Chi was a graduate of Chicago and Columbia, who had joined the party in America, was active in its work in New York in the thirties, and helped to edit *Amerasia*, before returning to Chungking to work for the Nationalist government, all the while acting as a covert Communist agent. Of course there was no reason Lattimore should have known this; but we do know now, and it would have been interesting for Newman to have pointed out these connections (as he points out in considerable detail the insalubrious connections of the various witnesses against Lattimore).

Moreover, it would have been illuminating to have had more on Lattimore's views from Leeds on the changes that China was undergoing in Mao's later years. Nothing is said of the great famine of the early sixties (though Lattimore, like most China experts of the day, was probably either ignorant about, or dismissed the evidence of the magnitude of that disaster) and little about the Cultural Revolution. What did he think of the drastic *volte-face* that took place after Mao's death under Deng Xiaoping? Such omissions are a bit odd in the tale of the career of a China expert; even if he had nothing to say on such subjects, that in itself would be interesting. Lattimore was a highly intelligent, broadly experienced, complicated man, who was still capable of writing in 1966 (in a passage Newman does not quote) that "if there is anything we must all learn, it is that in Mongolia, and in most post-World War II revolutionary countries, Marxist thinking is accepted as the great intellectual liberation." He was by no means alone in such views, of course, and 1966 was not 1992; still, such statements suggest that there is a more complex side to Lattimore's character than Newman indicates.

These criticisms aside, Newman has done a valuable service in reminding us of the hysteria of the McCarthyite years. Finally, as a historian, I cannot help noting that when he was under attack, Lattimore was, of course, a tenured professor at Johns Hopkins, a position that not only assured him of a job during his troubles, but protected him from the wrath of at least some of his trustees. And indeed of some of his colleagues. When they turned against him, it was in the Hopkins History Department that he found a home. Perhaps, then as now, historians were less affected than some others by the currents of political correctness—whether coming from the Right or the Left. □

THE VIEW AFTER SEVENTY

BILLIE DYER AND OTHER STORIES
William Maxwell
Alfred A. Knopf, $18, 117 pp.

Rand Richards Cooper

A few years before she died, my grandmother, then well up in her nineties, was answering a question of mine about her childhood when she broke off and said, with a flustered smile, "You know, everyone I ever knew is dead!"

Her words and their tone of rueful surprise kept coming back to me as I read William Maxwell's *Billie Dyer and Other Stories*, a collection of portraits culled from the eighty-four-year-old writer's boyhood in Lincoln, Illinois. "The view after seventy," Maxwell writes, "is breathtaking. What is lacking is someone, *anyone*, of the older generations to whom you can turn when you want to satisfy your curiosity about some detail of the landscape of the past. There is no longer any older generation. You have become it, while your mind was mostly on other matters."

The landscape Maxwell sets out to detail is a human one. His stories take up the lives of outsiders and underdogs: a black doctor suffering the daily indignities of small-town prejudice; a young teacher dying of TB; a wastrel uncle who never lived up to family expectations. They fill in gaps left not only by time but by the steadfast innocence of the boy Maxwell was, who moved away from Lincoln at fourteen still believing the town an "Earthly Paradise," and who was "not much better informed about the grown people around me than a dog or a cat would have been." *Billie Dyer* is his attempt, through memory and imagination, to inform himself; like Maxwell's magical novel, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* (1980), it's a very belated coming-of-age book.

The stories are rich in the artifacts of a small town childhood, circa World War I. There's a brother's lead toy soldiers, whose heads, broken off, have to be glued back on; a fifth-grade teacher escorted by her adoring class on her birthday to an afternoon matinee of D.W. Griffiths; an open-sided trolley car rumbling through the summer evening; the first local landing of an airplane, in a stubbly wheat field at the edge of town. Maxwell links the reader to an even more distant era through the older men of the town, who speak of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, of troublemakers shot for publicly celebrating President Lincoln's death. Part of the excitement of reading *Billie Dyer* is feeling the past being reclaimed from history and restored, in your presence, to lived, told life.

Maxwell's writing has a modest quality that masks its power and high ambitions. He is relentlessly self-effacing—a ghostly narrator who watches, listens, recalls, and quietly judges while rarely allowing himself actually to appear: in these half-dozen first-person narratives, he uses his own name only once or twice. His esthetic reflections sound similarly modest: he speaks not of writing or inventing these life stories, but of "reconstructing" them. We get hints of persistent, if haphazard, researches: of telephone calls to relatives and old acquaintances; of county histories carefully read and objects hunted down—like the notebook picked up by a real estate agent at the Dallas flea market that turns out to be the diary of Dr. William Dyer, the brother of the Maxwell family's maid, Hattie, and which, landing eventually on Maxwell's desk, forms the basis

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of the book's title story. It sometimes seems the main virtue Maxwell claims for this book is the factual and biographical information he was able to get his hands on. He speaks almost apologetically of having to "fall back on imagination" for the rest.

But, as is always the case with William Maxwell, things are not as simple as they sound. Like *So Long, See You Tomorrow, Billie Dyer* is a meditation on the trickiness of memory—its incompleteness and its susceptibility to our own manipulating emotions. "I would be content to stick to the facts," Maxwell coyly wrote in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*, "if there were any." The seamless weave of fact and fiction in these stories is both intriguing and impressive. Maxwell knows that while facts are what we crave, one must invent to know the truth. And his stories have a ring of absolute truth.

Again and again we encounter persons and lives summed up with a lucid insight that goes right to the heart of things. Maxwell can be tender, and the stories might be sentimental, were they not so zealously guarded by accuracy and irony, those twin watchdogs. Here is Maxwell on a dashing, failed uncle: "My uncle had a perfect understanding of how one should conduct oneself after one has arrived; it was the getting there that didn't much interest him." Or on his father's admired strictness: "[He] was capable of the sort of bluntness that makes people see themselves and their conduct in a light unsoftened by excuses of any kind." Or on a town curmudgeon:

> ...He had sad eyes and a sallow complexion and two deep furrows running down his cheeks. The tips of his fingers were stained with nicotine and the whites of his eyes were yellowish also, in a way more often found in dogs than in human beings. Nothing that he said was ever calculated to make people feel better about themselves, but he could be very funny....Because he said so many unflattering things, it was assumed that he was a truthful man. I don't think this necessarily follows.

If you are the type of person drawn to old photographs, fascinated by the mysterious and vibrant actuality of people long since perished (that boy in the background, what was he smiling about?), you will almost certainly love William Maxwell's book. *Billie Dyer and Other Stories* offers an attractive mix of oral history, regional writing, autobiography, and fiction. I'd put it alongside such works as Delmore Schwartz's *In Dreams Begin Responsibilities*; Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood;* Russell Baker's *Growing Up*; or the late poems of Robert Penn Warren—all rich evocations of lost places and times.

"The past," writes Maxwell, "is always being plowed under"—particularly in America, where we live, he laments, "in a perpetual present." Resolutely digging, this author keeps unearthing small gems that sparkle against the darknesses of death and forgetting. For forty years, as fiction editor of the *New Yorker*, William Maxwell published some of America's finest writers. It is becoming abundantly clear that the dozen books he himself has produced during his long and fruitful career place him squarely in that celebrated company. □

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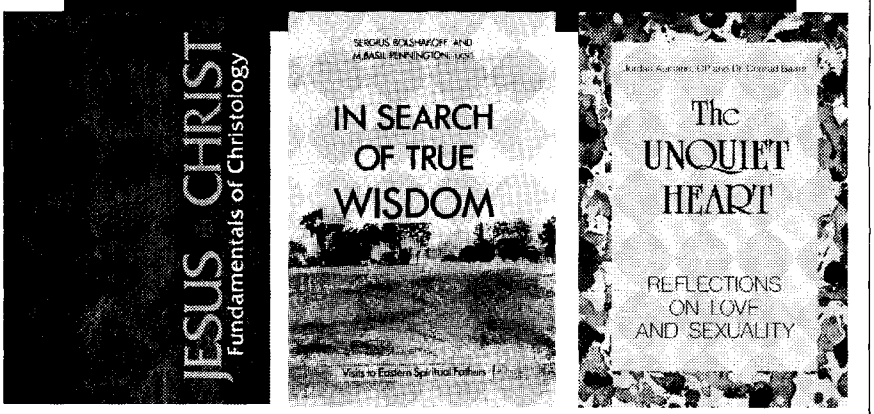

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HOMES FOR THE HOMELESS

OVER THE EDGE
The Growth of Homelessness in the 1980s
Martha R. Burt
The Urban Institute Press, $29.95, 267 pp.

Robert M. Hayes

One of the most revealing emblems of the go-go eighties in the United States was the emergence, for the first time in American history, of mass homelessness during an era of economic prosperity. Throughout that decade of material excess, record numbers of men, women, and children in emergency shelters and on the streets matched record highs in the stock market, corporate profits, and executive compensation.

In the early 1980s the homeless poor were "discovered," at least by the nation's mainstream media. By the mid-1980s the nation was sympathetic. Politicians pandered, public opinion polls showed widespread support for solutions, and community groups, along with some state and local governments, engineered basic and successful relief programs. But Washington, with the exception of minor emergency appropriations, stood paralyzed in the face of a national disaster afflicting hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of citizens. Washington's silence began with President Ronald Reagan's feel-good denial and stretched to one of the more pitiful comments by a federal official, the deputy assistant director for housing of the Department of Housing and Urban Development, Phillip Abrams, who muttered in 1982, "No one is living on the streets."

The buffoonery of the Reagan years, however, gave way during the course of the 1980s to a more sophisticated and dangerous denial—a denial not of the problem but of a remedy. By 1992 neither President George Bush nor the host of Democratic and Republican governors and mayors denies the existence of mass homelessness. Instead, they decry it, wring their hands in anguish, describe the complexity of the problem, and do nothing.

Well, it's not entirely fair to say that government does nothing to help the homeless. But even the best responses include only meager funds for "demonstration" programs and, invariably, the appointment of blue-ribbon committees, task forces, and the like to study the issue and make recommendations. The hapless administration of New York's Mayor David Dinkins showcases the government policies toward the homeless in the 1990s. Warmly and sincerely committed to the poor, Mayor Dinkins lacks the money and, some say, the vision to be of much help. So what does a good man do? He appoints a commission, chaired by, no less, Governor Mario Cuomo's son Andrew, which holds hearings, deliberates, makes headlines, and ultimately releases a report with recommendations. The mayor then appoints a new committee to study the recommendations. Bravo.

In a world ruled by sense, *Over the Edge: The Growth of Homelessness in the 1980s* would put an end to studies about homelessness by commissions, committees, task forces, and working groups.

But don't bet on it.

Burt's analysis is an intelligent and non-ideological capsulization of the obvious. Money, housing, and an array of social supports are the means of ending mass homelessness in America, according to *Over the Edge*. Amen. To say that Burt's work states the obvious is no insult. She carefully charts the conditions of poverty, mental illness, and drug and alcohol abuse which contributed to the rise in homelessness. She properly plots the demise of the low-income housing market in U.S. cities during the past fifteen years to demonstrate the fundamental cause of homelessness: people cannot afford housing. And she correctly calls for government intervention in the housing market through a regional approach of subsidizing renters where there are sufficient housing vacancies and developing additional affordable housing units where vacancies do not exist.

The thoroughness of Burt's analysis leads her to restate some fundamental, but unreadable, truisms: "Homeless persons are extremely poor," she declares. And elsewhere, "The probability of past suicide attempts is much higher in all subgroups of homeless persons than the national average...." Yet there is a very valuable purpose to this encyclopedic work. Its truth is unassailable. Its policy recommendations unavoidable. And its style and tone nonaccusatory.

The hypermoralism of the participants (this reviewer included) in the political debate over homelessness is mercifully absent from *Over the Edge*. So too is the florid emotionalism of recent celebrated books on the issue like Jonathan Kozol's inspiring *Rachel and Her Children*. While not readable by the general public, Burt's sober book should become the first line of offense when the next president or governor or mayor decides to appoint a group to study homelessness. The dodge of mystery should no longer work with a public that is, I think, still decent enough to demand a solution to homelessness. Slap any cover on this book, and you have an intelligent and workable analysis of how to end homelessness in your state or in your community. For each homeless person, Burt confirms, the solution remains chill-

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ingly simple. First, by definition, the homeless individual or family needs a place to live. Public policy must respond either by making existing housing affordable for that person, or by creating additional units that will be affordable.

To maintain that housing, Ms. Burt continues, something more will often be necessary. For some, it will be a job—often with training for that job. Others will need mental health care, remedial education, training or caring for children, substance abuse treatment. But the solutions are not complicated and the costs not infinite.

As we enter the second decade of mass homelessness in the United States, it sometimes is difficult to keep in mind that American sidewalks need not resemble wretched campgrounds. But we should remember that until the past decade we avoided mass homelessness in this nation. Burt, like most authors who speak truthfully, points to simple and real answers. It is not likely that her definitive study will end homelessness or even end the political charade of blue-ribbon committees which continue to study homelessness. But, at a minimum, *Over the Edge* points us in the right direction. □

FLYING HIGH

PARADISE NEWS
David Lodge
Viking, $21, 294 pp.

Edward T. Wheeler

David Lodge has returned to familiar territory—sex and the fences Catholicism seems to throw about it. This is a love story, a status report on the minds of late twentieth-century theologians, an allegory of modern tourist practices as pilgrimage, and finally a meditation on finality: of the four last things, death, judgment, heaven and hell, only death is certain. The other three items get marginal restatement in a quotation from Unamuno by way of *Reader's Digest*.

This is so deeply Catholic a book it is a wonder that it is not religious. No, *Paradise News* is a literary novel, as previous works by the former professor of English at Birmingham University (U.K.) have led us to expect. The hero, Bernard Walsh, very much in the pattern of Lodge's displaced academic heroes, quotes Yeats, points the direction of the neo-Platonic allegory, and yet, in ways most unlike his predecessor Phillip Swallow (*Changing Places, Small World, Nice Work*), gains from us considerable compassion. He is unpretentious, honest, and likable as he grows into competence in facing a world which has lost its old meanings. Bernard is a laicized priest; his disillusionment, his agnosticism, his skeptical teaching of theology, and his awakening to love in "paradise" offer a review of the last thirty years of church history and one of its possible outcomes. *Schadenfreude* was a term that Lodge used in his earlier works, that joy in others' misfortune; the measure of the author's own trajectory into late middle age can be taken at the narrowness of the arc of the humor he lobs at death: satire becomes more a grimace when the ground starts to open closer to our own feet.

Sexual tension with a unique Catholic twist, which Lodge exploited so humorously in *The British Museum Is Falling Down* and *Souls and Bodies*, still drives the novel, but the force of sex is darker as the chief characters move closer to ends. The plot takes Bernard and his crusty father to Hawaii, the paradise of the title, to tend a terminally sick aunt. The journey there gives the book a locus, a sort of *Canterbury Tales'* Tabard Inn with wings. The souls are departing to the fortunate isle and one traveler, a sociologist with a specialty in tourism, offers Bernard and us the allegory of package tour as pilgrimage. But there is a skull ready to grin beneath the skin of all those who inhabit paradise. Lodge shows us the effects of cancer and the modern way of dying in nursing homes; *memento mori* for Bernard's aged aunt is a call to exhume an episode of sexual abuse in her vivid but distant Anglo-Irish past. The return to her roots is a discovery of a sort of maggot, the sexual serpent in the Catholic stem which cankers marriage and the embrace of life. She and Bernard's father have to come to terms, and do. As the flesh withers from his aunty's frame, laicized Bernard discovers mortal rebirth in sexual therapy. The novel ends justly with family reconciliation, happy death, redemption of the body, and atrophy of belief. The flesh is indeed always and finally willing. But the spirit? Bernard's spiritual and theological being hangs by the slenderest of hopes—the stretched sense that this life can't be all there is. (This in bald paraphrase is Unamuno's contribution.) Not

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much *pneuma* comes through the noose.

The book rehearses familiar Lodge narrative structures: contrasting settings, one in drab English Rummidge and the other in exotic Hawaii; multiple perspectives recorded through the texts of postcards, journals, videotapes and the like; the shifts from the major plot structure by way of interleaved segments—a cinematic technique—and cameo appearances of characters from earlier novels. This is an artfully and vividly realized world. But David Lodge has us reaching for anthologies to check citations or to pursue a scriptural reference. The cross-matching of the allegory does tease a reader: if tourism is pilgrimage, then the reverse holds true and the church is travel agent. Thus Bernard on his loss of faith:

> The appeal of the gospel message... remains essentially the same. The Good News is news of eternal life, Paradise news. For my parishioners, I was a kind of travel agent, issuing tickets, insurance, brochures, guaranteeing them ultimate happiness. And looking down at their faces from the altar, as I pronounced these promises and hopes week after week, looking at their patient, trusting, slightly bored faces, and wondering whether they really believed what I was saying or merely hoped that it was true, I realized that I didn't, not any longer, not a word of it....

Later we overhear Bernard as he delivers an introductory lecture on trends in twentieth-century theology. He asks rhetorically what distinguishes a Christianity purged of a promise of eternal life from secular humanism. The answer: "It's as if Jesus left this essentially humanist message [Matthew 25] knowing that one day all the supernatural mythology in which it was wrapped would have to be discarded." We also hear the true and narrow bickerings of families over estranged relations, over possible inheritance, of the burden of profoundly disabled children. And the effortless prose—the pleasures of the text that are not above a type of readerly foreplay and delayed consummation. Yolande Miller is the initiator of Bernard's awakening to the flesh. Here is experienced Eve giving virgin Adam the right news in paradise. It is a grand and enjoyable read; but the plot leaves little doubt that the forms of theological thought cannot contain the wine of life. No, nor can the institution of the church offer much more than social service. This is an honest meditation on the last things, but the prayer which evolves from the clear apprehension of death is more an affirmation of *eros* than of *agape*. □

LEANERS & FOLLOWERS

THE MYTH OF THE INDEPENDENT VOTER
Bruce E. Keith, David B. Magleby, Candice J. Nelson, Elizabeth A. Orr, Mark C. Westlye, and Raymond E. Wolfinger
University of California Press, $35, 220 pp.

Dotty Lynch

The Myth of the Independent Voter has only three things going for it: timing, accuracy, and a silver bullet. It is well researched and well reasoned. While it is aimed chiefly at an academic audience, its findings have implications for journalists and politicians as well as scholars. In this season of "rage is the rage," this book is a particularly helpful path to understanding the lasting attachments of the American voter to the two-party system—and a warning to be wary of claims of the imminent collapse of the current institutions.

The "silver bullet" which these researchers have found—and remind us about with glee in each chapter—is that the current conventional wisdom that there has been a political "de-alignment" and an enormous rise in the "independence" of voters from party ties is based on "lumping together" three different types of voters who call themselves independents. Two of the three categories are not very independent, at all. Keith, Magleby, et al. use the data compiled by the University of Michigan National Election Studies since 1952 and separate those "independents" who say they "lean" toward a political party from those who are "pure" independents. Thus, while the total number of voters classifying themselves as independents rose (between 1952 to 1990) from 23 percent to 36 percent, the number of "pure" independents rose only from 6 percent to 11 percent. This becomes significant because the rest of the book substantiates the analysis that the "independent leaners" are really quite partisan—and in some cases even more partisan than voters who classify themselves as Republican or Democrat.

This is not to say the "image" of independents is not getting stronger or that more voters wish to think of themselves as free of party ties. The book begins by describing a Bill Mauldin cartoon from 1957 in which a man explains his outlook on politics. "Me, I vote the man not the party. Hoover, Landon, Dewey, Eisenhower...." While this may express an American ideal, most American voters tend to stick with one party most of the time. Data from studies of voting patterns have tended to show that independents have had lower rates of participation and less interest in and knowledge of politics than have partisans. Thus, while the claim to be "independent" has carried a certain cachet, the view of political scientists toward "independents" was decidedly negative. This has changed a bit over the last ten years as scholars tended to see a better educated, more involved group of independents, and the focus on them as "swing voters" made them precious to political practitioners. But the authors of this book—by using their analytical "bullet"—show that it is the "leaners" who are the more knowledgeable (especially those who "lean Republican") and conclude with the same low assessment of the civic virtue of pure independents that political scientists have expressed over the last forty years.

One concession they do make to the

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"How did you apportion blame?"

rise- of-independents notion is that this *has* happened among white voters in the South who have moved from the Democratic party in presidential elections but who aren't ready to align themselves with the GOP in name or in nonpresidential elections. However, they point out that while white Southerners do show some "de-alignment," black voters have become more strongly attached to the Democratic party and are about the strongest partisans in the electorate.

There are many applications for the book's findings. For analytical purposes the distinction between the "pure" and "leaning" independents is a gem. For the journalist and pundit it is a terrific caution. But for the practitioners—the candidate or pollster who knows that elections are often won by two or three points—the incremental increase in those voters who refuse to align with a party and will take cues almost exclusively from candidates and their individual campaigns is still quite important. Modern political campaigns are based on the premise that all weak partisans and independents are susceptible to persuasion and that the willingness to split tickets is a given. I wish these authors had spent a little more time on these aspects of "de-alignment." I think they could have shed some light on the independents to see if the appeals need to be targeted differently. To the "leaners" vs. the "pures."

The data strongly support the premise that the rise of independents is a myth and that the apparent increase in their numbers has occurred mainly in a category people check on a questionnaire and not in real-life voting behavior. Still, the book concludes with two chapters that try to associate various theories for this rise—even in label. The authors reject both issues and alienation as explanations, and thus reenforce the notion of the basic stability of the two-party system over time.

The 1992 election will clearly be a test of this thesis. With politics as usual and a pox on both your houses being the "story line" of the year (and the rationale behind the probable independent candidacy of Ross Perot), this election may—or may not—see a true rise in independents and a destabilization of partisan ties. The authors admit there was a small relationship between increasing alienation from the system and the increase in "pure independents," and this year's polling has shown a great leap in the number of voters expressing major dissatisfaction with the political system. However, in elections other than the presidential, voters will have only Democratic and Republican candidates to choose from. The authors have given us a helpful tool to analyze the voting intentions of independents—both pure and leaners—and to help us keep in mind that beyond the anger of the moment and the desire for "fundamental change," the two-party system remains the dominant force in American voting choices. □

Life as Liberty
Life as Trust

Edited by J. Robert Nelson

"This collection of six essays, originally presented as part of a religious/medical lecture series, has a twofold task: the first is to remind Christians of their rights and responsibilities as stewards of all that God has given them; the second is to individually explore the goals and realities of stewardship which actively confronts racism, violence, hunger, and questions of biomedical ethics. . . . The essays are uniformly thoughtful, generally avoid jargon, and end on notes of call to action against particular social ills. . . . Recommended."

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WITHOUT AMBASSADOR—OR DIPLOMACY

THE AMERICAN RELIGION
The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation
Harold Bloom
Simon and Schuster, $22, 247 pp.

Edward T. Oakes

Cardinal Newman once said, famously, that the church of the fourth century woke up one day and discovered it was Arian. Harold Bloom, Yale's renowned literary critic, claims in his latest book that Americans too will wake up one day and discover, not that they are Arians, but Gnostics.

Now, "Gnosticism" is a notoriously protean term that covers a wide range of religions and worldviews. But what all the manifestations of Gnosticism have in common are two traits: a spirit-matter dualism, and a belief that the human spirit belongs by nature and right to the divine spirit. Indeed for Gnosticism the human spirit has always been an essential aspect of the Godhead that somehow fell into the world of matter, there to remain alienated from its true home until death brings release. The Gnostics of the second century were fond of invoking a telling metaphor for this sense of entrapment: the soul is in the body, they said, as gold is embedded in the mud. Not only is there no essential connection between soul and body, but the former is precious beyond compare while the latter is vile and dirty.

Now at first blush nothing would seem to be more alien to the American ethos than such a repugnance to the body, especially after forty years of Hugh Hefner and the cult of the young body. But Bloom is too shrewd to stop at these surfaces. For him the essential trait of the Gnostic motif is not matter-spirit dualism but the assertion of the direct and essential connection between the human and divine spirits. For the Gnostic, God and the human spirit are so ontically fused to one another that self-knowledge is, by definition, equivalent to a knowledge of God ("gnosis" in fact means knowledge in Greek; Gnostics got their name from insisting that the connection between God and the soul was so direct that faith was superfluous, as there was no real gap to cross in the darkness of trust).

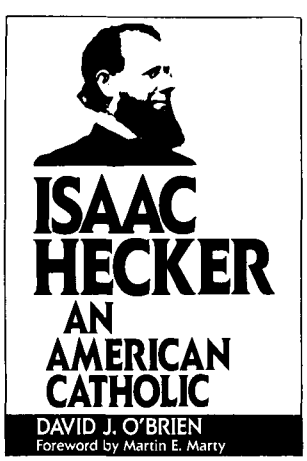
Late in the book Bloom quotes Emerson's line that "it is by yourself *without ambassador* that God speaks to you....It is God in you that responds to God without." Here we see the essentially Gnostic moment in the American ethos. Indeed Bloom could well have gone on to quote the poem "Good-bye," which shows more clearly than any other work of Emerson's how Gnosticism's unmediated relation to God will inevitably lead to an alienation from matter and the world of creation as well:

> Good-bye, proud world! I'm going home;
> Thou art not my friend, and I'm not thine.

As a critic, Bloom has always been intoxicated by the American Transcendentalists, Emerson and Whitman in particular; and this intense familiarity with their work has given him an astonishingly acute vision, enabling him to see the implicitly Gnostic motivation of so many of our home-grown religions, Christian Science, Mormonism, Southern Baptism, Pentecostalism and the New Age movement:

> In perfect solitude, the American spirit learns again its absolute isolation as a spark of God floating in a sea of space. What is around it has been created by God, but the spirit is as old as God is, and so is no part of God's creation....Something in the American self is persuaded that it also preceded the created world. The freedom assured by the American Religion is not what

A biography of one of the most important persons in 19th century American Catholicism



Isaac Hecker—mystic, priest, journalist, missionary and founder of the Paulist order—was a fascinating figure who left his mark on a broad range of 19th century American life. Now David O'Brien, professor of history at Holy Cross College, Worcester, MA, offers readers the first modern, comprehensive biography of this man of vision and substance.

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> Protestants once called Christian Liberty, but is a solitude in which the inner loneliness is at home in an outer loneliness.

As perhaps these citations already indicate, I found this an amazing book: dazzling in its insights, provocative in its thesis, and often very, very funny in its observations. Not since D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* have I read a work on American civilization so penetrating and so exciting. Henceforth, the burden of proof will lie with the opposition, with those who deny the Gnosticism of our home-grown religions or the inner pathos that has given them birth:

> Unlike most countries, we have no overt national religion; but a partly concealed one has been developing among us for some two centuries now. It is almost purely experiential, and despite its insistences, it is scarcely Christian in any traditional way. A religion of the self burgeons, under many names, and seeks to know its own inwardness, in isolation. What the American self has found, since about 1800, is its own freedom—from the world, from time, from other selves. But this freedom is a very expensive torso, because of what it is obliged to leave out: society, temporality, the other. What remains, for it, is solitude and the abyss.

Despite the undoubted brilliance of this book, however, the reader should be warned that an eccentricity runs through Bloom's entire analysis, one that threatens to undermine what he has tried so effectively to demonstrate. This same eccentricity totally vitiated the thesis of his *The Book of J* (which claimed not only that parts of the Pentateuch were written by a woman but, more crucially, by a proto-novelist whose God was little more than a literary trope). But nothing daunted, Bloom has emerged from the attacks on *J* with the same sensibility intact. He still insists that Gnosticism is, if not true, at least a much more plausible alternative for us than the classical Judaism or Christianity of the canonical Bible. Claiming to be a "Gnostic without hope," Bloom insists throughout the book that he is not so much criticizing the American Religion as celebrating it.

But this simply is not true. The reader simply cannot take these frequent protestations seriously, ("this may seem like an unsympathetic account, but that is certainly not my intention"); in every chapter Bloom proceeds to fillet one more branch of the American Religion—so severely, in fact, that they all begin to resemble merely different varieties of the fishmonger's salmon. His dissection of Matthew Fox's creation spirituality is particularly withering (so much so that Cardinal Ratzinger could certainly afford to lift the Vatican penalties against him, as there will be little left of Fox's reputation after the appearance of this book). But I cite Bloom's severity for wider reasons: his treatment of Fox is but the most devastating example of his general method, for all the other "founders" of American religions such as Mary Baker Eddy or Joseph Smith come under a similar indictment, if rarely so scathingly put. And if Bloom's readers were in any doubt about his real

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attitude toward our home-grown religions, they need merely consult the last chapter, "So Great a Cloud of Witnesses," where the author examines the tacit political alliance that binds all of the adherents of the American Religion together (however divergent their theologies might *seem*) into the Republican party: "President Bush waves the flag and the fetus, and we are returned to some of the darker consequences of the Gnostic stance of the religion of our climate."

In my judgment, *The American Religion* is fundamentally a locale for a uniquely Bloomian theomachy, where the divine ghosts of Emerson and H.L. Mencken can be glimpsed fighting it out while the author tries to make up his mind between them—and by the end of the book Mencken has clearly won the palm of victory. The more the book progresses, the more obvious becomes the sneer for the "booboisie," and for any variety of politics that does not pass muster with the Mandarinate of the liberal elites. Occasionally, but only occasionally, Bloom will admit that the academic pooh-bahs in our university humanities departments are as Gnostic as the religions he puts under his critical microscope ("Networking in our America, these days, takes place either among the politically correct cranks of the high camp of resentment, or among the dank cranks of the belated Aquarian conspiracy, trying to float our planet off into cosmic consciousness"), but this insight gets him nowhere because of his deep ambivalence toward Gnosticism to begin with.

It is this ambivalence that brings the book to the very cliff's edge of failure (only its brilliant perspicuity saves it from falling right over into the abyss it so well depicts). By conviction and sensibility, Bloom cannot appreciate, but only note, the Barthian and Augustinian alternative that classical Christianity can pose to American Gnosticism. But so unsympathetic is he to this alternative that he cannot see the opportunities in America posed by the last representative of biblical Christianity that still has any institutional strength left: the Catholic church. (Bloom does however note, most interestingly, that if the rule of celibacy were relaxed there would be nothing to stop the American Catholic church from being co-opted by American Gnosticism.)

One is therefore left with an odd mixture of feelings upon completing this fascinating book: exhilaration at its insights mixed with regret for its missed opportunities; excitement at the debate it will provoke mixed with dread at the course the debate will take; admiration for the brilliance of the author mixed with a sadness at his plight. When he describes himself as "a Gnostic without hope," Bloom has said more than he can possibly imagine. □

AN OSSUARY OF A NOVEL

VERY OLD BONES
William Kennedy
Viking, $22, 255 pp.

Paul Elie

They say William Kennedy put Albany on the literary map. Because I grew up near Albany, the city has always been on my map, so I've dutifully read the novels in Kennedy's Albany cycle and followed their reception in the press. Critics invariably compare Kennedy's Albany to Joyce's Dublin and Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, diligently connecting the dots from book to book to build their case that Kennedy has made transcendent the city where I used to go hear punk bands called Capitle! and the Lumpen Proles and Fear of Strangers.

But the discussion of the novels as installments in a cycle about Albany and the Phelan family has distracted people from the task of judging them as individual works. And the difficulty of doing so pressed upon me as I read the miscellany that is *Very Old Bones*. Kennedy's sixth novel has the hardscrabble wit, verbal grace, and classicism of all of his work, and yet it points up the liabilities of an artistic method that consists of leaving stories partly told, narrative strands willfully undone.

The novel is ostensibly a memoir written by Orson Purcell, who, with typically playful self-consciousness, describes himself as a "precocious scholar, sometime newsman, editor of books, working on a book of my own, and on top of it all, a line officer in the big war, what a guy." Born in Greenwich Village, the illegitimate son of artist Peter Phelan and onetime showgirl Claire Purcell, Orson might have become the first of the Phelans not to be fettered by home and family and religion. As a young man he spends the postwar period in the Army in Germany, devising shady schemes and wooing and marrying the Frenchwoman Giselle, a glamorous aspiring photographer. Later he decamps in New York, scamming still, taking Giselle on a second honeymoon of sorts at the Plaza Hotel, and "expanding the jots and

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fattening the tittles" of a celebrity memoir for which he is the ghostwriter.

The younger Orson's exploits, written in the ironical, wonderstruck style Kennedy often employs when not describing down-and-out types, suggests the liberty that beckons those who truly shake off the yoke of family. But several bouts with the Phelan madness force Orson to seek asylum in Albany, where he attends to two family matters that are the heart of the book. Peter Phelan has never acknowledged Orson as his son—and as Peter has grown old and ill, living and painting in his late mother's house ("the museum of everybody else's rejected past"), Orson has become desperate to lay claim to his ancestry. And Peter, lately having become wealthy through the sale of his art, now wishes momentarily to assume the role of munificent patriarch, and so he tells Orson to summon the surviving Phelans for a family council.

This "inescapable presence of the absence of fathers" will be familiar to readers of *Ironweed* and *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game*. But the new book is set two decades after those books, and as the family members gather at the Phelan house in 1958, for the first time since their mother's death, this sense of absence is heightened by the increasing absence of familiar Albany. The city's Irish North End is "in a stage of vanishing tradition, dying to its old self." The gambling parlors where erstwhile local hero Billy Phelan once hustled a living have been shut down, the customary two-night Irish wake has been cut back to a single evening, and urban renewal threatens to alter the area irrevocably. And these social changes are accompanied by moral ones: looking at a photo of a group of North End men that hangs in a Broadway bar, Orson observes, "Nobody worried about pasting stars on the chests of those men after they died, the way old man Becker used to. One by one the stars had gone up on those chests through the years; then sometimes a star would fall and be carried off by the sweeper. Stars fell and fell, but they didn't rise anymore, and so now the dead and the quick were a collage of uncertain fates. Hey, no star on his chest, but ain't he dead? Who knows? Who gives a goddamn?"

The Phelans do, that's who. In this novel, the three main characters persist, in their own ways, in keeping the faith as caretakers of the Albany Irish legacy. In two celebrated series of paintings, Peter Phelan transmutes into art the legend of his crazed ancestor Malachi and the story of his brother Francis's suicide attempt. In the "memoir" that is this novel, Orson recreates these and a host of other episodes from Phelan history—the deaths of his aunts and uncles, the family's vacations on Saratoga Lake, and the teen-age Francis's sexual encounter with an older next-door neighbor, first depicted in *Ironweed*. Giselle, now a photojournalist, takes family pictures and photographs Peter for *Life*; her affection for her father-in-law is such that when she and Orson find that she is pregnant, there are hints that the familiar cycle of ambiguous paternity has started all over again.

As it focuses on the Phelan artists, the novel, naturally, is crammed full of ruminations about the place where art and family meet. Orson is our aesthetic guide, and

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Those who do the great heroic work of being human never work solely from experience. My father, for instance, could never have painted his Malachi Suite, that remarkable body of paintings and sketches that made him famous, without having projected himself into the lives of people who had lived and died so absurdly, so tragically, in the days before and after his own birth. I am not implying here that any historical reconstruction is heroic, but rather that imaginative work of the first rank must come about through its creator's subordination of the self, and also from the absorption into that self of what has gone beyond or before its own existence.

—William Kennedy
Very Old Bones

his theorizing ranges from the slyly epigrammatic to the simply pedantic. At other moments Orson (like journalist Martin Daugherty in *Billy Phelan's Greatest Game*) serves as spokesman for his creator; his stated aim in his memoir—"to drain myself of myself, and to project myself into realms of the family where I have no credentials for being, but go there even so; for I do know the people in this memoir, know where and how they lived, or live still"—jumps off the page as Kennedy's own artistic credo.

In *Very Old Bones*, as always, Kennedy has projected himself into the realms of the Phelans expertly, and often profoundly. It is hard to convey the sureness and the rightness of his portrayal of them. It is also hard to convey the extent to which these moments are smothered by Orson's account of his exploits in Germany and New York, and weakened by Kennedy's wont for having characters wander in and out of the novel, refusing to stay put. In some ways, the novel's bag-of-bones collection of memory, present action, and imaginative history is a shrewdly chosen artistic approach—appropriate for a bastard son who learns and recounts the Phelan legends at a late moment in the family's history, and appropriate for his creator, an artist whose aims are broader than any one novel can accommodate. But it is hard not to feel, as Sarah Phelan's "uncharacteristically abrupt" death and the family council too quickly and neatly wrap up the novel, that *Very Old Bones* lacks the significant form of Kennedy's previous books; and it is hard not to wonder if its pastiche structure reflects not so much an Albany Irishman's response to the ghosts of his past as a successful novelist's response to the busy schedule of his present. Kennedy has said that he has already planned at least four more books for his Albany cycle. This Albanian hopes that one of them might be a full-scale treatment of the way Albany's Irish North End was altered by public-works projects; and I hope that as Kennedy writes those novels, one at a time, he proves my suspicions about this novel to be groundless. □

CORRESPONDENCE

(Continued from page 2)

should publish such a lengthy piece of serious criticism speaks well of the high standards of your journal. That *Commonweal* should know that Professor Johnson was the right person for the job speaks well of your knowledgeable staff.

I am in basic agreement with almost everything Johnson said in his perceptive comparison-and-contrast of the two books. In particular, I agree that more needs to be said by both authors about how each work fits or does not fit into some larger theological project. In my own case, I had hoped to address that point in an epilogue at the end of Volume Two of *A Marginal Jew*. Alas, Topsy has now grown to three volumes, the second of which I hope to deliver in manuscript form to Doubleday by the fall. So my *apologia pro opere suo* may be somewhat delayed.

If I may sketch an ever-so-brief outline of my *apologia*: I see *A Marginal Jew* as a militantly untheological work. Such must be the case, since it is supposed to remain a consensus statement that all the famished professors imprisoned in the Harvard Divinity School library could agree to, at least in theory. I do not agree with some right-wing theologians that this means a least-common-denominator approach or a capitulation to the agnostic member of the mythical team. As in all ecumenical statements, everyone has to give a little, and the agnostic might have to agree to compromise language or a line of argument that he or she might not use when speaking independently. To repeat the main point: *A Marginal Jew* must remain within the ambit of what is at least in principle empirically verifiable or arguable by reason on the part of all interested and competent parties. Hence, such matters as the Resurrection, while affirmed by believers such as myself as supremely real, cannot be an object of investigation in my book.

Strange though it may seem, I would hold that in fact such a strenuous restriction to verifiable history is not all that common in Jesus-of-history research, despite frequent claims about adopting such a restriction. Actually, from Hermann Reimarus [1694-1768] onward, the quest has usually been either an attack on traditional Christian faith or an attempt to rethink or reformulate Christian faith in a new cultural context. In other words, for all the talk about a purely historical approach, it has basically been a theological (or antitheological) project. This is pellucidly clear in the case of a contemporary like Geza Vermes, who trumpets his objective approach in one breath and then polemicizes against the Council of Nicaea in the next. In less obvious ways, it is equally true that the post-Bultmannians of the New Quest, as well as Catholics like Küng and Schillebeeckx, have been engaged in a fundamentally theological exercise, in which historical investigation plays an important part.

I intend my work as a conscious break with such an approach; hence the subtitle, "Rethinking the Historical Jesus." If Jesus of Nazareth is a historical character—and I have argued at length in Volume One that he is—then it is legitimate to launch a historical investigation of him that prescinds, at least for the time being, from the framework and questions of Christian theology. That is not to say that such questions are wrong or illegitimate. It is to say that a legitimate theological project becomes hopelessly confused and short-circuited if it is brought into play too soon and allowed to influence what should be a purely his-

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torical investigation.

I see this approach as involving not dichotomy or separation—as some right-wing theologians have objected—but rather distinction (an honorable Catholic category from the Trinity on down). Once the untheological, historical project is completed, then there is time and place for theological correlation or appropriation. I would suggest *a priori* that such a correlation or appropriation might take place in three stages: (1) One might first attempt a "low-level" correlation of the results of the historical quest with the Christology of the Gospels and the rest of the New Testament. (2) One might then move on to a more complicated correlation with the great doctrines of Nicea, Ephesus, and Chalcedon. (3) One might finally attempt the still more difficult hermeneutical leap to contemporary concerns: e.g., liberation theology, feminist theology, etc. By the way, I am by no means opposed to this third stage, although I think it has usually been accomplished poorly and hastily in the recent past.

I realize that this is all terribly sketchy, but it is my best wisdom of the moment. Let me repeat that I appreciate tremendously the insightful observations and helpful suggestions of Professor Johnson and your willingness to foster dialogue by publishing them.

(REV.) JOHN P. MEIER

The writer is a professor in the department of religious studies at the Catholic University of America.

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To the Editors: Abigail McCarthy is opting for wimpiness unnecessarily ["The Empty Tube," April 10] in the face of the devastation television is wreaking on our public and private lives. The good news is that thoughtful people are becoming increasingly aware of the drastic threat posed not only to our democratic institutions but to our souls by television; the bad news is how few see the simple, completely feasible, effective, and world-altering solution: Get rid of your television set, do it now, and encourage others to do the same. Let's stop analyzing the situation. This medium cannot be redeemed.

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